

Would You Come Home?

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/34001920) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/34001920>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	陈情令 The Untamed (TV) , 魔道祖师 - 墨香铜臭 Módào Zǔshī - Mòxiāng Tóngxiù
Relationship:	Lan Zhan Lan Wangji/Wei Ying Wei Wuxian
Characters:	Lan Yuan , Lan Sizhui , Lan Jingyi , Ouyang Zizhen , Jin Ling , Jin Rulan , Jiang Cheng , Jiang Wanyin , Lan Zhan , Lan Wangji , Wei Ying , Wei Wuxian
Additional Tags:	Family Feels , Sizhui learns about his family , jiang cheng is trying his best to be better than his parents , good uncle jiang cheng , good friends jingyi and zizhen , Journey of Self Discovery , No beta we die like wei wuxian , wei wuxian is lan sizhui's dad , lan zhan is also lan sizhui's dad , Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Junior Quartet Dynamics (Modao Zushi) , Junior Quartet , Time Travel , Time Travel Fix-It , Podfic Welcome
Language:	English
Collections:	Insp , Noa's TBR , Numerous OTPS Infinite Fandoms
Stats:	Published: 2021-09-21 Completed: 2022-03-17 Words: 46,929 Chapters: 14/14

Would You Come Home?

by [s6115](#)

Summary

Jiang Cheng wrote three times a year for over a decade and a half requesting that Lan Sizhui come and visit. Finally, at nineteen, arrived, having absolutely no clue why the sect leader would want him to come. Jiang Cheng showed him to his quarters, opened the doors, and said, "This was your father's room."

Suddenly, Lan Sizhui finds himself in the home of the father he'd forgotten, but surrounded by his things. With the relics left behind by a man shoved into shadows by an awful war, Sizhui has to figure out who his father was and why people refuse to say his name. Possibly, he and his friends might even bring him back from the dead.

Podfics Welcome

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Meet Me In the Middle

Three times a year, like clockwork, Hanguang-Jun received a letter from Sect Leader Jiang. When Lan Sizhui was young, he didn't notice the trend. He only saw that once in a while, his caretaker received a formal letter from the Jiang Clan, which Hanguang-Jun would neatly fold, the *barest hint* of anger setting in his forehead, before he found a respectable way to toss the letter aside. When Lan Sizhui was maybe eight, the curiosity got the best of him, and he asked, *what does the Jiang Clan request?* And Hanguang Jun huffed, the only answer Lan Sizhui got about the matter.

He was ten when Zewu-Jun pointed the trend out. "Isn't it about time for Jiang Cheng to write you again?"

The tease did not amuse Hanguang-Jun, but finally, Lan Sizhui noticed it. First, he saw that a few months later, another letter arrived, marking the second with a year. Then another. The following year the same thing happened.

"Does this happen every year?" He asked Zewu-Jun. The Sect Leader laughed like Sizhui said something funny, but he found himself left out of the joke.

Three times a year, so regularly one could predict the week it might arrive, they received word from Jiang Cheng. If Hanguang-Jun wrote back, Lan Sizhui never saw. Lan Jingyi was the only one who dared voice the most obvious question.

"It can't be a normal letter, can it?" He said. There was no way requesting aid in a night hunt, discussing trade matters, or naming which of their disciples would attend the lectures would create such a reaction from Lan Wangji. "What are the letters about?"

"I don't know," Lan Sizhui replied. Ouyang Zizhen clucked his tongue, and the obvious was left unsaid. If any of them were able to find out, it had to be Sizhui. Ouyang Zizhen certainly couldn't ask, and Lan Jingyi... well, maybe Lan Jingyi had the daring stride to pipe up the question, but he certainly wouldn't get a response.

So at nineteen, after so many years of watching the letters come in, the decision was made. His friends hyped him up, promising he could totally have the nerve to do it, and nothing bad would happen from asking a question. Lan Sizhui stood in Hanguang-Jun's home, watching as their teacher picked up the spring time letter from the Jiang Sect.

"Hanguang-Jun, if I may," Lan Sizhui asked. He received a hum in response. "Why does the Jiang Sect write you three times a year?"

If Lan Wangji furrowed his brow, he was too far, at his desk, for Lan Sizhui to see. "It's only that we can tell he isn't writing to you about trade disputes. It's something else."

Hanguang-Jun stood, and it took all his training as a Lan for Sizhui not to bolt. *I shouldn't have asked, I'm in trouble, how many times will I have to copy the rules?* But when Hanguang-Jun crossed, it wasn't for that. Instead, he -

"You are old enough," Hanguang-Jun said. Lan Sizhui looked down, seeing his teacher hand him the very letter that caused so many questions.

Lan Wangji

Once again, I am requesting the one you call Lan Sizhui to come and visit Lotus Pier. There is a room ready for him with your permission.

Lan Sizhui looked up. "I don't understand."

"You are old enough to make your own choice." Hanguang-Jun said. He moved, sitting at his guqin table now. "The condition. If you choose to go you must come home."

It wasn't what Sizhui was expecting. And when he reported the development to his friends, well, it wasn't what they were expecting either.

“Wait,” Jingyi said. “Why does the Jiang Sect want you to visit?”

“Why have they *been* wanting you to visit?” Zizhen asked. “I mean, that has to be weird, right? For them to write three times a year, for over a decade? Almost two, maybe? How long have the letters been happening?”

“For as long as I can remember,” Sizhui said.

“Hanguang-Jun isn’t going to tell you,” Jingyi said. Unfortunately, that had to be the case. He couldn’t ask the Sect Leader to answer his questions, he wasn’t the one who received the letters. Not to mention, Zewu-Jun seemed quite protective of his brother’s secrets, and Sizhui respected that. Jingyi made a very good point. This was not a mystery that could be solved inside of Cloud Recesses.

Not that he hadn’t tried. In various moments, while debating this odd conundrum, he tried to bring it up with Hanguang-Jun.

If you do not wish for me to go, I will not.

Sizhui couldn’t be certain if he truly saw the smallest flare of his mentor’s nostrils or not. Perhaps it was in his head, making something out of nothing. Perhaps he just wanted Hanguang-Jun to want him to stick around. What he really wanted was for Hanguang-Jun to say something, anything.

Why on earth would the Jiang Sect write three times a year, inviting *him* to go?

After a fortnight, enough was enough.

Write us, Zizhen requested in his latest letter, because Sizhui’s friends were just as curious as he was. Ever the sweetheart, Zizhen even sent a small gift to thank the Jiang Sect for the invitation, a flowering “shooting star” tea he claimed was his mother’s favorite. Jingyi snorted at that. *After all this time, they may just be happy you showed up*, he said.

Sizhui didn't quite think that was necessarily true. Maybe the Jiang Sect would just be mad that it took him this long to show up. Was it rude of him to have 'waited' all these years? While it may remain true that Hanguang-Jun hadn't told him about the letters before now, it didn't mean that Sect Leader Jiang hadn't been waiting all this time.

It made him want to turn around. He was at the gates, but surely he could get on his sword and just fly away. Sizhui wasn't scared, but... he was apprehensive. More apprehensive than he had ever been in his life. Three times a year, the people beyond these gates called for him. What did that mean? A disciple waved him in, and Sizhui nodded, bowing his head respectfully.

"Do my eyes deceive me? A little Lan?" They said. He kept his face still. *I'm nineteen, not little!* He could say, but surely he was old enough to not stomp his feet over his age. "You wouldn't happen to be Lan Sizhui, now, would you?"

"Yes, young mistress," He said. "If that's alright with you."

"Of course. Perhaps it means Sect Leader Jiang will stomp stomping about like the floorboards offended him."

Sizhui had been so wrapped in the mystery, he'd almost forgotten he'd be spending *weeks* with a sect leader known for his short temper. He nodded, carrying his box of things up to the main residence of Lotus Pier. Why were they going to the main residences? Why was he here? Why would him showing up, sure after all this time, be an *aid* to Sect Leader Jiang's temper? Why was he here?!

"Sect Leader," The disciple said, opening the doors to the meeting hall. A man in vibrant purple sat on a lotus-shaped chair, its grandiosity leaving no doubt to who he was. "Look what I found wandering by the gates!"

He looked up, hands stilling over the blade of his sword, rag in one hand. Sizhui put his box down and bowed deeply in greeting. "Sect Leader Jiang, I am honored to make your acquaintance. My name is--"

“I know.” Jiang Cheng stood up. He put his sword away, as away as could be considered with its polite displacement back into the hilt in his belt and approached. “Welcome to Lotus Pier.”

“Thank you for the warm welcome and invitation,” Sizhui said, and bowed once again. *I was really surprised by the invitation. Hi, why am I here? Thanks for inviting me, I never knew you had before. Say, why are you inviting a random Lan disciple into your sect territory?* Really, there was a whole host of questions he could ask, if he were anything like Jingyi, he might have managed to utter any of them. Even one would be nice. Unfortunately, it seemed he was a bit too much like Hanguang-Jun to utter a word of it.

“I’ll show you where you can put your things,” Sect Leader Jiang said.

Sizhui balked. Surely someone more appropriate could be found to show him around. Sect Leaders were *busy*, right? He knew all the duties that Hanguang-Jun had to take care of on a day to day basis, and he was only Zewu-Jun’s brother. “Surely that is unnecessary.”

“It’s necessary.” Sect Leader Jiang said, and that was that. Sizhui picked his things up and followed. He wasn’t sure what he expected – perhaps one of the quarters further away from the main hall. He was no one important, no one titled. He was still just a disciple, right? But Sect Leader Jiang didn’t even leave the courtyard. He went up a few steps to a large door, opening it.

“This was your father’s room,” Sect Leader Jiang said.

For Lotus Pier’s warm temperature, Sizhui went cold. He blanked, only his years of mimicking his mentor kept his jaw from fully dropping. It took a moment, before he finally turned his head towards the Sect Leader, the question, the thousands of questions hanging in the air.

“Ha!” Sect Leader Jiang scoffed. “Of course, the *great Hanguang-Jun* doesn’t know enough words to say this much.”

The disrespect was there, but there was more than enough on his mind to put that far to the side.

Dear Zizhen;

You are not going to believe this.

Sizhui wasn't sure he believed it himself. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Your father. This was his room, from when he lived here. From his childhood on," Sect Leader Jiang repeated.

Dear Jingyi;

I believe I'm being pranked. You would enjoy this.

"Lan Sizhui. If anyone will use this room, it may as well be you. Nothing has changed from when your father last slept in there. All his things remain. You may explore as you wish."

The sect leader descended a few steps, leaving Sizhui on the porch. He paused on the ground, turning slightly back. "You may call me Uncle. It is good to have you home."

When he finally managed to pull himself into the room, it wasn't any easier. Unlike the dormitories, the quarters were filled with warm wood tones. The light was more yellow in Lotus Pier, perhaps due to the warmer temperatures outside. He had yet to take a moment to 'appreciate the view' that Lotus Pier was so famous for, but in his defense, he had been *busy*.

Of course, Sizhui knew he had a father. Everyone had a father, who helped with a mother to create a new person. Logically, he knew he had a father. Emotionally, he knew that to, from the way Hanguang-Jun told him.

You had a father. I will not take the title from him.

And he knew, from the ache in his chest, that once upon a time, he must have loved the man he babyishly called Dad. He was sure there was someone he *missed*, and missed a lot. Sizhui was grown now, however. He was too old to cry for someone who wasn't there.

Somehow, that didn't make it any less painful to cross the threshold.

How was it his father was a member of the Jiang Sect? How did that make any sense? He had always assumed his birth parents were Lan, like Jingyi. It didn't follow that Hanguang-Jun would adopt him if his parents were outsiders. It didn't follow that Zewu-Jun would take him under his wing. It *truly* made no sense that Lan Qiren would dare let him into the homes of the inner most Lan if his parents were *Jiang*. Judging by the famed temper, surely Lan Qiren wouldn't want such hostility near his nephews.

These quarters were close to the main family. From its placement, he wouldn't have been surprised if someone told him that this was where Jiang Cheng himself spent his childhood nights. Who was his father that had such placement within Jiang Sect?

Jiang Cheng seemed to be telling the truth at least about a few things. The room had not been touched, aside from cleaning. There was no dust among the support beams, the floors had a soft shine to them. He had no doubt the bed was fresh and ready for lying. But the table on the side had notes on them, a rushed, though neat, calligraphy detailing some kind of talisman Sizhui couldn't wrap his head around.

There was a red ribbon next to it. Long, like it was for hair. For some reason, looking at it made him sad.

Hanguang-Jun, forgive my intrusion.

Why didn't you tell me?

He couldn't write such a letter, could he? There had to be a reason, right? There had to be some reason why Hanguang-Jun didn't say the reason the Jiang Sect wanted him to visit was that his *father* was a *Jiang*. There had to be a reason Hanguang-Jun hadn't said a word about Sizhui's father for all these years.

For all the letters he wanted to write, he could only manage to put ink to paper for one of them.

Jingyi

I think I need you to be slightly rude for me.

Wish I Found the Words When We Were Seventeen

Chapter Summary

“Your father was like you. Lost his parents quite young, he didn’t have any memory of them either. Once he was old enough to realize and understand that, he was also old enough to know it would take an array. He believed he could create a talisman that would let him see old memories... he so wanted to remember his mother’s face.”

Sizhui spent the evening trying to convince himself to snoop. He had the permission, after all. It wasn’t really snooping. Everything he knew said his father, whoever he was, had been dead for near twenty years now. The sect leader, the man who said to call him uncle, with all his famed temper, *told him* to explore to his heart’s content. He just couldn’t quite make himself. Instead, he found himself staring at the red ribbon on the desk for far too long, eyes glancing to the uncompleted talismans to the left of it until his body told him it was nine o’clock.

When he woke up, the first thing he saw was a drawing. There, carved into the bedframe, it was a little stick figure family. He reached out, feeling the etching, where the wood was much darker than its polished remainder. Everything here was his father’s, the sect leader had said.

Sizhui was only mildly surprised to find a few attendants by the main house, a kettle waiting, and a bowl of congee. A woman bowed, a slight smirk that would have Lan Qiren ready to burst on her face, the wrinkles by her eyes deepening. “We were warned you’d be up early! You don’t disappoint, little Lan.”

He bowed back, “I hope you weren’t up just for me. I’m sure I can prepare my own breakfast.”

“Oh, shush! We’re just hoping to help you get comfortable.” She promised. “I am Zhou Yun.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, I am- “

“Oh, we all know who you are!” She said and handed him a bowl and cup of tea. “We thought perhaps you might never come.”

“I’m afraid I didn’t know of the invitation before now,” he said.

“We are not offended.”

“I am glad to hear that.” He said and politely took a sip of his tea, hiding it behind his sleeve as he drank. It was steeped a little longer than Cloud Recesses would have allowed, at least for a morning brew. He didn’t mind the taste. “May I ask a question?”

“I’m sure you have mountains of them,” she said, sitting across from him at the table, her posture informal but not rude. Somehow. Perhaps he really did just need to get used to the casual nature of the Jiang Sect. “I know you Lans don’t participate in gossip, but many of us were quite pleased to know you were here.”

“Then I suppose you heard then that I did not know the reason for my invitation?”

“How odd,” she said. “But not unexpected. Your father was a great pride for us for a very long time. It was such a shame what happened to him.”

“A shame?” Sizhui asked.

The smirk on her face faded, leaving only a sad, small smile, barely adding any wrinkles to her chin. “It is nice then that his son is in that room. It has been empty for so long.”

“Surely some honored guests have stayed there?” Sizhui asked.

She snorted like he had said something funny. “Heavens, no. That room has been empty since the day he left. Not even Jin Ling goes in. Jiang Cheng keeps it locked for everyone but himself and those who keep the cobwebs away. It’s the guilt, you know.”

“I’m afraid I don’t,” Sizhui shook his head. He leaned a bit forward, wondering if she’d keep going. Perhaps she would tell him some deep dark secret that would explain it all. She didn’t. Her fingertips drummed on the tabletop, a faraway look in her eyes like she was *considering* saying more, but there were reasons not to that outweighed some teenager’s morbid curiosity. “Mistress, may I ask something?”

“I am Zhou Yun; please, feel free.”

“Mistress Zhou.” He said. “When I awoke, I noticed in the bed frame, there was a carving. You say no one has been in there since my father?”

“Ah! When he carved that, I thought Madam Yu would strip his hide. But we were so delighted.”

“He carved that?” Sizhui asked. “Wait, you were-?”

“Your father was an artist,” a man’s voice said. Sizhui turned, finding Sect Leader Jiang there, looking firm as ever. “Well. He was *quite a lot* of things.”

“He was?” Sizhui asked. Jiang Cheng walked the perimeter of the room and poured himself a cup of tea. “He truly carved that.”

“Zhou Yun will only prepare your tea for you this once,” Jiang Cheng warned. “We prepare our own food and drink here. No one will wait on you.”

“I am fully prepared to do so.”

“He carved it.” Finally, Jiang Cheng answered his question. “I don’t think I was prepared to see my sister grin so much because of what he’d done.”

Sizhui nodded shortly. He had heard all about the tragedy that was Jin Ling's mother. He knew not to press that wound, at least avoid it as much as he could. "May I ask, why was it such a delight?"

"One may say that your father was born to the Jiang Sect," Zhou Yun said, leaning in just a bit. "However, his parents had become rogue cultivators and died on a night hunt, leaving him behind. He was only a handful of years old and was lost to the streets for far too long."

"My father picked him up, brought him here. He walked on eggshells for quite a long time," Jiang Cheng said. He huffed, groaning as he sat down at the table. "When he made that carving, it was this moment when we realized he'd stopped being so careful and felt more at home. He was what... nine?"

"Mm. Perhaps ten at the oldest." Zhou Yun nodded at Jiang Cheng's prompting. She turned to Sizhui. "Your father was very good at that, you know. Studying a room and knowing how to act, depending on the people there. In a second, he could tell what attitude would cause the trouble he wanted."

"My father... was mischievous?" It was the first question to leave his lips, which was almost daft. He had so many more. The tiny fragments of information he was getting only led to more questions. Suddenly he knew what ones he wanted to ask when before, he barely knew where to start. *His parents died too? How old was he? Why was he left on the streets? If he was born to the Jiang Sect, why did they not leave him here while they left to night hunt? He was an **artist**?*

Jiang Cheng stared at him, teacup hovering by his chin like Sizhui said the most outlandish thing in the world. Zhou Yun howled out a laugh.

"Yes. Your father was mischievous."

"Lan Wangji did not even tell you that?" Jiang Cheng asked.

"It is not a fault of his," Sizhui promised. "I could tell very early on that he knew my parents, but that speaking of them brought him pain. I did not wish for him to bear anymore."

“No, of course not. It’s not as if...” He sighed, shaking his head. Jiang Cheng snorted. “No mind. You’re here now. Now. Your father told me all about the *cold pond* of Cloud Recesses.”

Sizhui frowned. So, his father was an artist... one that traveled to Cloud Recesses? Who had allowed him anywhere near the cold pond? Was it just the healing waters? Had Hanguang-Jun taken him, if they were truly so close?

“That’s no place for someone to learn to swim. You are a Jiang, and you’re in Lotus Pier. I won’t start a war between us and the Lan just because you fell off the bridges between buildings and drowned. Wait an hour after breakfast, Zhou Yun will take you to the lake.”

She grinned at him, “Your father was one of the best swimmers I ever taught. You’ll be fine.”

“I...” Sizhui said. “I can paddle?”

Jiang Cheng snorted again. “Not good enough.”

Dear Zizhen;

You would have quite the laugh if you were to see me now.

“You must stretch your arms *long*, young master!” Zhou Yun said. “Long! Or you won’t get very far and you’re only wasting your energy.”

Isn’t it already wasted? I could be walking all the same, Sizhui wanted to say. He was their guest, however, and poking fun wasn’t honorable behavior. And fine, he could see the use. For some reason, a good third of Lotus Pier’s building were straight over water. Even to enter something as common as the Ancestral Hall, the path was entirely over small bridges, with no land access at all. Falling into the water to visit some random building would be embarrassing enough. Sizhui wouldn’t want to add drowning to the list. Not that he *would*, of course. As he had said before, he could paddle through water in an emergency just fine.

But she had said his father was a very strong swimmer. The lure there was strong enough.
“Did you teach my father?”

“Yes. And he was racing with the best of them in a few years’ time.” She said. “When he and Sect Leader Jiang got to it, no one could stop them. Except for your aunt, of course.”

My aunt, my aunt. That would be the tragic Young Mistress Yanli. He frowned. *Wait.... That would make Jin Ling-?*

“Why did no one say Jin Ling would be my cousin?”

She laughed at him. Rude. “Poor thing! I suppose no one wanted to open the door to so many questions. It’s quite a sad story.”

“No one has told me the sad story.”

“That is because you’re meant to be swimming.” She scolded. “Did you think you could pull a fast one on me? I know all your father’s tricks.”

“What tricks?” He pulled himself on the docks. His arms felt like over-cooked noodles. Perhaps this was why no Lan bothered to master swimming – it was utterly exhausting. If he kept at this, he’d end up in bed before nine, to Lan Qiren’s great shame. “Sect Leader Jiang- “

“*Uncle.*”

“It’s quite strange to call him that,” He did *not* retort, thank you very much. Sizhui was a well-mannered Lan, and he said that with no snark at all ~~perhaps just a little~~. “He said my father was an artist, among other things.”

“Your father was a genius.” She waded in the water in front of him, the hems of her robes folded neatly into her belt. “I’m quite sure he only mastered artistry to aid in his genius. He was the smartest in the past several generations when it came to talismans. By the time he was fourteen, he knew more than most his teachers in that respect.”

“Talismans?” Sizhui asked. “He was a master at talismans?”

“Oh yes. He loved taking them apart to the barest details and putting them back together in different ways, creating new ones at the drop of a hat.” She said. “But he did that with everything. As a young man that was how he made his money, you know. Creating new things and selling them. You know those spirit lures?”

“Yes.”

She grinned at him. “He invented them.”

He gaped. “My father is the inventor of the spirit lure?”

“Oh yes. As well as the compass of evil and a host of other techniques.” Zhou Yun said. She put her hands on her hips, taking a step forward, ever a threatening premise. “Are you getting back into the water yet, young man? Or must I grab your ear and drag you in?”

“Please, a moment’s rest,” He requested. “I just didn’t expect my father to have so mastered talismans of all things.”

“Talismans offered a promise something as simple as swordsmanship didn’t. Not that he wasn’t also a master of that.”

“What did it promise?”

“Your father was like you,” She said. “Lost his parents quite young. He didn’t have any memory of them either. Once he was old enough to realize and understand that he was also old enough to know it would take a talismanic array. He believed he could create a talisman that would let him see old memories... he so wanted to remember his mother’s face.”

There were unfinished talismans on the desk, Sizhui remembered. Next to the red ribbon, there were so many crafts and sketches... “He wanted to -? I don’t understand.”

“Neither did anyone else.” She laughed again. “Oh, he could go on about it, though. For all his years here, he was always creating a talisman to let him see old memories. But he could never remember where he was, so he was always starting over again. And over again and over again... and blowing off his eyebrows when one went awry. Now, will you get back in? You’ll never be a Jiang if you get so tired from barely two incense sticks of swimming!”

Because I’m a Lan, lady. He wanted to say. But the allure of Jiang, perhaps, was starting to grow on him.

As much as he wanted to, he didn’t take a nap after swimming. For one thing, that was against the rules, *no sleeping at inappropriate times or inappropriate places*. He did take lunch, shocked at how hungry he was after swimming. After that, he couldn’t ignore the pull back to his quarters.

His father’s quarters.

Sizhui gently slid the door closed behind him and approached the desk. Zhou Yun was right. Each drawer, each surface, had mounds of talisman papers. He picked one up, and another. *Binding*, one said. Another, *bonding*. He thought he might find some he recognized, perhaps with childlike practice marks along the top, but those must have long been tossed away. He frowned.

Perhaps it was just best to ignore reason and go ahead and try. Sizhui sighed and picked one up. Like Zhou Yun said, it appeared half-finished, but... He raised his hand, fingertips glowing with spiritual power as he traced the talisman in the air.

Nothing happened. Crap. He tried again. Nothing happened. Fine, then. Sizhui picked up another one, same as before with its half-finished presentation. She had said his father never truly completed one, but she also said he blew off his eyebrows trying. He could at least do the same. His fingertips glowed and he traced it into the air.

The world went dark. Almost.

Sizhui stepped forward into the nothingness, hearing his footsteps echo despite nothing around him. It was all black. He walked, surprised, seeing—

He walked, stepping closer and closer. There. There was a baby, no, a toddler. His mouth banana'd down like he was wailing, but no sound came out. His clothes were threadbare, old, misfitting, and the cloth looked so uncomfortable and itchy. He sat on the emptiness; arms wrapped around —

“Hanguang-Jun?” Sizhui said. His adoptive father looked younger in the way only an incredibly strong cultivator could. He had not physically aged a day, but the inexperience was there in his eyes. Truly, his mentor looked so distressed as the toddler clung to his leg and wailed in muted silence. “Is that me?”

Sizhui turned. There were three older men egging Lan Wangji on, mouths opening and closing as they spoke, but like everything else, no sound came. Perhaps they were offering advice on how to soothe a child. Perhaps they were making fun of Lan Wangji for not knowing how.

“Why am I dressed so?” He asked, turning back to Lan Wangji but the man had stopped looking so upset at his uselessness but was looking off to the side. There was a new man, young like Lan Wangji.

But he was dressed like the toddler. The cloth was barely dyed and didn't lie well on his shoulders, patches worn through to the middle layers of his robes from overuse. The man quickly stepped in, pulling the baby off of Lan Wangji's leg and held his hand. Lan Wangji opened his mouth, and the man opened his own, tapping his chest and smiling.

There was a red ribbon in his hair. Sizhui swallowed painfully. The man had kind eyes, bright from the laughter on his face. He had freckles, two around his nose, and one just under his lips, nearly hidden by the curve of his smile. “Dad?”

The illusion broke. He was back in his quarters stood by the desk, a half-finished talisman in his hand. The only difference now was that his eyes were wet. It had worked... almost. Why couldn't he hear anything? Was that truly him as a toddler? If Hanguang-Jun hadn't adopted him yet, why was he there? Was it all a lie?

Zhou Yun said his father had been working on such talismans for as long as he stayed at Lotus Pier. If that one had let him see something, perhaps another would confirm what he had seen. Perhaps another would let him hear something, hear his father's voice. Perhaps another would show him their home, not just the people in it.

His father was a master of talismans. Perhaps Sizhui had inherited some of that skill. Perhaps. Perhaps?

Perhaps he could piece some of them together and finish the task his father had lost the chance to complete. Perhaps he could finish the dream his father had started. Perhaps he and his father could be a team. Perhaps he could see a complete memory and meet the father he'd lost.

Dear Jingyi

I need you to send me some books.

Could We Both Stop Keeping Score

Chapter Summary

“He-“ Jin Ling pointed one of the most angry fingers that Sizhui had ever seen in all of his nineteen years of life at him. “Was in the locked quarters!”

“I know.” Jiang Cheng said.

“You- ! What? But he was in there! He was messing with things!”

“I know.” Jiang Cheng sighed, lowering the sword in his hands, quite bored as he stopped his polishing. “Say hello to your cousin.”

My Good Idiot;

What the flying fuck do you mean, he's your uncle?

-

On the bright side, Jingyi had tried asking Lan Wangji several times (politely, I promise, I just pressed a little harder than I would have. It's what you wanted, isn't it?) about why Jiang Cheng wanted him to visit. About the supposed relationship that they would have, and about the supposed relationship that Sizhui had not just to the sect leader, but to the man who had been in this home so long ago.

Apparently, without Sizhui, the great Hanguan-Jun remained even more stoic than he was before. Not cool, really. Was his foster father sad now? Had Sizhui caused him to be sad by leaving? He had promised to return.... But maybe that was the problem. Maybe Sizhui should have heard in that one command, 'you must come home', that Lan Wangji didn't want him to leave in the first place.

*Seriously, if this guy really is your dad, someone should have said something.
No disrespect, obviously but what did your dad do that no one will
say his name?*

Jingyi, for all his great ploys, was just as intelligent as the rest of them. In a letter alone, he had dared voice questions that Sizhui hadn't yet had the courage to even think. Zhou Yun had

mentioned that there was a very sad story waiting to be told, but how sad could it be that none had yet dared tell Sizhui who his father was? Hanguan-Jun once said he refused to insult the man who was his father by allowing himself to be called dad. When he adopted Sizhui, however, he still gave the child his name.

He remembered all the benefits to the name when he was young. People bowed when he walked past, even when he was so small. He got to have breakfast and dinner with his foster father, even in his seclusion. He had the best teachers that all those in the direct family received. He became head disciple – yes, because he had the talent and the drive and the hard-earned skill, but without those teachers and direct line, perhaps he wouldn't have stood a chance.

That's not true at all, Zizhen would say if he were here. You earned Head Disciple on your own merit!

Sizhui frowned. He was sure Zizhen would mean it with all his heart, and maybe even all his tears if he thought Sizhui was feeling particularly down about himself with the whole thing. He had worked hard to get where he was. Of course, he did. It wasn't Zewu-Jun, who didn't need to work to become sect leader. Head Disciple was a lot of work. It took a lot of intuition as well, when Hanguan-Jun decided someone 'wasn't qualified' to talk to him it meant Sizhui needed to pipe up and say what was on his foster father's mind and adding a nice, thick layer of manners to it. He did work hard.

But he also knew what was on his foster father, his mentor, his Hanguang-Jun's mind, by nature of being his adoptive son. So perhaps it wasn't work at all.

Can you send me a copy of some of the talismans? Lan Qiren won't let me in most of the library. It's as if he doesn't trust me! But it will be easier if I know what to look for. I can't believe your father was some master of talismans, but we've never heard of him. It's truly insane.

Oh, he was right. It truly was insane.

I'll keep bugging him, for sure. But it would be a lot easier if I had the faintest clue what you were talking about.

Sincerely,

Jingyi

“Sect Leader?” Jiang Cheng furrowed his brows as he stared at the papers in his hands. Sizhui resisted the urge to pout and purse his lips. Better late than never, he supposed. “Uncle?”

Jiang Cheng looked up. “Yes, Sizhui?”

“If you have a spare moment, I was curious, may I ask a question or two?”

“I may not answer them all but feel free.”

“Of course,” Sizhui said. He bowed respectfully; hands outstretched into the opposing sleeve as he did. “During my swim lesson yesterday – “

“You’ll have another tomorrow. Give your body a chance to rest and recuperate.”

Sizhui inhaled. Of course, it wouldn’t be quite so simple. Swimming wasn’t some great shame, but it was certainly quite a heavy task while he was so bad at it. “I was told yesterday that not only was he an artist, but my father was quite good at talismans?”

Jiang Cheng snorted. “*Quite good*. He would have been called the expert of our generation had things not gone so awry.”

“How had things gone awry?”

The question was dangerous, and Sizhui could taste it. It was always hard to ask people where their lives went wrong, and this was such a question but so much worse. He wasn’t

asking, where a mistake was made? He was asking, in a sense, *how did he die?* How had Jiang Cheng lost a brother who clearly as held so dear, no one dared talk of him anymore?

Finally, Jiang Cheng said, “it just did.”

“I’m sorry to mention such pain,” Sizhui bowed again. Jiang Cheng was wearing a look he had seen before. Of course, when Lan Wangji wore it, it was more subtle. The barest downturn of his eyes, how his fingertips stilled over his guqin, the hints were so subtle that Sizhui was sure the only ones who could tell were him and Zewu-Jun. Jiang Cheng was more open. He refused to look at Sizhui. While his hands usually lay at his side, or in front of him, now they were clenched behind him, as if letting go would mean letting go of something vital. A memory, probably. “May I ask then, instead, if he was a master of talismans, were there books he used to get there? Or if he had notes?”

Jiang Cheng finally turned to face him again. “Unfortunately, my brother was a madman in his own right. Everything he learned he mastered on his own. He was always quite bad at asking for help. I blame his parents for that.”

“I see. I was only hoping-“

“To know how his mind worked?” Jiang Cheng supplied. Sizhui nodded. How strange that Jiang Cheng could know his mind after being here for so short of a time! Perhaps it was the ‘family’ part of the ordeal. Sizhui wasn’t one who would be able to know. “I spent most of my childhood with him, and I don’t know if I could say. I will say he was intelligent, and he was impassioned. When he had a goal, it didn’t matter the consequences of achieving it.”

He looked sad again. Why, though?

“I suppose we were lucky his goals often were only to do good, no matter how much it may have hurt.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I.”

Oh, dear Sizhui,

The last thing I would have expected is that your requested visit was that out of family! I'm so glad to hear you're finally meeting those who came before you.

Of course, Zizhen would turn this into some fluffy sweet thing. Sizhui wasn't feeling fluffy and sweet about anything. Not for the first time, he wished his friends were here. Zizhen could find the kindness in anything. Sizhui picked up the red ribbon and held out some of his hair, laying it on top of the black strands.

The contrast was kind of nice, but against his white robes, didn't work as well. He thought of the father he had seen, the gray, thick woolen mess itching over his thin arms. His father wore the red ribbon better, Sizhui decided. He didn't think he could pull it off as well as the Jiang man had. ‘Oh, but you could!’ He was sure Zizhen would say. ‘Isn't it grand you can try it now?’

I wish I could be there with you. To finally begin to know your family must be so stressful a time. Please, tell me all about it, and I can find some way to help.

Sometimes, Sizhui wasn't sure what he'd done to deserve someone like Zizhen.

“What the hell are you doing in there?”

Sizhui spun. Sixteen and full of stubborn, yellow anger, Jin Ling had his fists clenched at his sides, face puffed up in disgust. Sizhui blinked.

“I live here.”

“No, you do not!” Jin Ling yelled. “Get out right now!”

Sizhui put down the ribbon delicately back into its place and stepped out of the quarters. “I mean no disrespect, Young Master Jin. However, I do indeed stay here for the duration of my visit. How long are you staying?”

“*I spend half my life here!*” Jin Ling spat. “No one ever goes in there. Ever!”

“I’m afraid that –“

“No! When Uncle finds out you went in there, he’ll explode!” Jin Ling insisted. He turned on his heel and, quite like Jiang Cheng, to the posture of his shoulder, stomped off. Without much less to do, Sizhui followed. After all, it was the first time he saw his ‘cousin’ after the big revelation. “Uncle! *Uncle!*”

“What is it now, Jin Ling?” Jiang Cheng sat in his lotus-shaped throne, once again polishing his three poisoned sword. He seemed utterly bored.

“*He-*” Jin Ling pointed one of the most angry fingers that Sizhui had ever seen in all of his nineteen years of life at him. “Was in the locked quarters!”

“I know.” Jiang Cheng said.

“You- ! What? But he was in there! He was messing with things!”

“I know.” Jiang Cheng sighed, lowering the sword in his hands, quite bored as he stopped his polishing. “Say hello to your cousin.”

Jin Ling blustered. A load of nonsense came from his mouth, bubbling over in strange, uneven sounds. There was a *what*, a *why*, a *how*, and many more sounds that none of which managed to form a complete idea. He turned, sputtering to face Sizhui. For the effort, Sizhui offered a small, consoling wave. “*When did you marry?*”

“Jin Ling!” Jiang Cheng sounded a bit angry. “I would never marry a Lan!”

“Well, he’s not Jin Guangyao’s!”

“Obviously not. No one would suffer him to live so long were he Jin Guangyao’s.” Jiang Cheng returned to his handiwork.

“Then he’s not my cousin! And he’s not allowed in that room!”

“He is your cousin, and he is staying in there.”

“NO one’s allowed in there but you and-

“Yes, I know.” It seemed that Jiang Cheng gave up on his sword, and he set it to the side. With the posture of a favored leader, he stood, and descended the small steps to his chair, until he was level on the floor with the two of them. “He is my brother’s son, and that room was his father’s.”

Jin Ling sputtered again. He couldn’t seem to decide which way he wanted to look – at Jiang Cheng in his utter disbelief or to Sizhui, in some mix of confusion or disgust. Sizhui tried to help and bowed. “It is good to introduce myself as family to you, Young Master Jin.”

“Cousins,” Jiang Cheng reminded him. “You do not need to call him master.”

“You don’t have a brother!” Jin Ling finally sputtered.

The room turned to ice. Jiang Cheng shut his eyes for a moment, for two, before turning on his toes to Jin Ling and stared. The icy glare seemed punishment enough and Jin Ling took one step backwards. That completed, he turned to Sizhui. “Perhaps your cousin would feel better about this all if you were to show him to your quarters.”

“Of course... uncle.”

Jin Ling had certainly been rude enough for Sizhui to at least work on the habit of calling him uncle. Jin Ling followed him, not quite with his tail between his legs, his back was tall enough for a sect leader. He was quiet the whole way, however, which was as close to shameful for his actions as one could get for a teen his age. Sizhui slid the door open, and stepped to the side, letting Jin Ling walk in first.

“It’s... normal in here.” Jin Ling said.

“I was told everything in here has been left the way it was when he lived here,” Sizhui said. “That I may explore and learn as much about him as I can. I would ask... please be gentle. There is much in here I have yet had the time to cherish.”

Jin Ling nodded. “I don’t know how you can stand to sleep in the room with his ghost.”

He was being metaphorical, clearly, but the sentiment was there. “It’s comforting to me. I never knew him before. I didn’t think I’d have the chance.”

Jin Ling turned to him, hands behind his back. “Are you *truly* my cousin?”

Sizhui shrugged. “I don’t know. They don’t say much. But it seems to me he was adopted into the Jiang family at a young age, and it is clear that Sect Leader Jiang holds him very close to his heart. As he does for you.”

Jin Ling didn’t say anything at first, just clicked his tongue and wandered the room. He went to the desk, reaching out –

“Please don’t!” Sizhui insisted. Fast enough to make Lan Qiren spit his tea, he quickly went to the desk, keeping Jin Ling from touching anything. His breath hitched and he shut his

eyes. *Calm down already.* “I’m sorry. These are my father’s talismans. I thought... I believed I could make them work, and perhaps learn more about them. But they are delicate.”

“Hmph.” Jin Ling said. The younger teen was trying to be stoic, like one always thought a sect leader would be like, but Sizhui could read that inexperienced face just fine. “What do they do?”

“They... in some ways, show the past. But not all of them are finished.”

“What does *that* mean, in some ways show the past?”

“Well, they aren’t finished. But I’ve been told my father was like me. He lost his parents young enough that he couldn’t remember their faces,” Sizhui said. He picked up the talisman he had used before. “He was designing these to see the memories he’d forgotten. But they are unfinished and do not completely work.”

“And you want to make them work?”

Sizhui most certainly was not blushing. Of course, he wasn’t, he was *far* too old to blush, unlike Jin Ling! “As long as I am here, I may as well try.”

“And what has happened?”

“This one... it showed me people but nothing else. I could not hear anything, nor see where they were.”

“Were you not strong enough?”

Dear Jingyi,

*Young Mistress is acting up again. He is lucky I have yet to warm up for sword practice.
Did I mention this makes us cousins of all things?*

Sizhui resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“Shut up! I don’t mean it like that!”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Oh, like hell you didn’t. You Lans never have to, you’re too *prim and proper* to show emotions like us lowly humans,” Jin Ling sneered. “If I write the talisman *with* you, maybe more spiritual power would make it stronger, and I could see my supposed uncle, too.”

“You truly want to do something like this, with me?” Sizhui asked. Jin Ling had just made his opinion of the Lans very clear. “This could be dangerous. He may have been a master, but none of them are completed, and I don’t know how well tested they are.”

“You tested one, didn’t you?” Jin Ling protested. “You said so yourself. It worked it just didn’t work well. I want to see for myself.”

“I *did*, but I couldn’t hear anything, and I can’t say for certain what I saw was true, and it didn’t even last very long!”

“It lasted long enough! He’s my uncle and I would like to know what the big secret is!” Jin Ling stomped his foot. What a great sect leader he would be! Stomping his feet like a *child*. Sizhui would need to copy some rules later... particularly *don’t be judgmental of others’ temperaments, particularly of children*. Not that Jin Ling was ever so much younger than Sizhui. Perhaps if they were raised like cousins, Sizhui would have fallen into that role of protective elder. Perhaps one day he would ask why that opportunity was taken from him.

“Fine.” He held up the talisman to demonstrate. “Just focus it on me. Perhaps then it will take you to my memories with me.”

Dear Zizhen;

I believe I may be the worst Elder Family Member ever. Am I meant to be protecting a younger cousin from potentially dangerous things rather than dragging him down with me?

Sizhui had never seen a talisman drawn *stubbornly* before. There was a scowl on Jin Ling's face as he did, the blue spiritual power petering out with his intentions. It didn't do much damage, still, and shockingly, it worked. Sizhui found Jin Ling there, in the deep, dark empty place right next to him.

"Where are we?"

"I told you," Sizhui said. He began to walk. "The talisman isn't finished. It only shows the people, not the place or the sounds that they make."

First, they came across a young Sect Leader Jiang. There was a lotus ornament in his hair, clearly the sect leader that they'd always known him as, dressed in light purples and blues. He seemed frustrated, saying something bitter with his hands behind his back.

Then another man swirled in, formed by smoke until he solidified. "That's him. That's my dad."

He was dressed in rags, just as before, but the grin on his face showed no mind. He held Sizhui in his arms, dressed the same. He held the toddler out, hands under his armpits and legs dangling as he presented Sizhui to Jiang Cheng like a first meeting. The toddler Sizhui seemed delighted, a grin on his face and feet swinging. He looked like he was giggling madly.

"This can't be true." Jin Ling decided. "Uncle would never let a man who represented the Jiang Family *dress so shamefully*."

“He’s not dressed shamefully.” Sizhui insisted. Jiang Cheng reached a wary hand forward, no smile in sight, and carefully tickled the toddler’s stomach. He didn’t look pleased about anything, but at least the baby laughed. “Perhaps it is all he could afford.”

The memory faded as light poured in. Just like that, they were back in Sizhui’s quarters. Jin Ling’s nose crinkled.

“How could it be all he could afford? As a beloved member of the sect, *supposedly*, ” Jin Ling sneered. “Uncle would have given him better clothes. Otherwise, he’d be an embarrassment to the Jiang! Clearly, we are not cousins!”

“I’m not saying I understand it all,” Sizhui said. “But I am going to figure it out.”

Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “And how on earth do you plan to do that?”

“All his work is here.” Sizhui insisted. “I will go through it all and I will figure it out. My friends are willing to help.”

Jin Ling paled. “Please don’t tell me Jingyi is *coming here*.”

Sizhui’s face was that of a perfectly well-behaved Lan. “If he has to, I will invite him.”

I Can't Look Away

Chapter Summary

“So, if any of this is real, then your dad is an asshole who thought it was okay to take a toddler spelunking.”

“You can’t be in this family if you cannot swim!” Jin Ling sneered from the docks. His arms were crossed, the yellow fabric folded neatly into his golden belt as he watched Sizhui flounder in the water. He’d yelled Zhou Yun off, demanded that he was to see Sizhui ‘flop around like a dying fish’ on his own. Sizhui wanted to rip out a lotus and fling it at his face.

Dear Sizhui,

I’m sure you’re a fine elder family member! It is true, you missed the cutest stages, when they are all tiny and wobbly and walking to you for everything. That doesn’t mean you missed the best stages.

“I can swim!” Sizhui insisted. He could – every Lan learned how to in case of emergencies. One never knew when there would be some lake side Yao. Even Lan Wangji once said he had to face a water ghoulish while on a night hunt, and one of the hunting members nearly drowned as the ghouls swarmed after dragging the boat to the middle of the lake.

“You can swim, my foot!” Jing Ling retorted, stamping one foot on the dock. “I thought you Lans were meant to be graceful! You look like a cat that’s been put out.”

“I am doing my best.”

As the elder, your job is only to guide and nurture. It’s easier to learn how to do so when they are younger and don’t remember your mess ups, but that’s okay. I doubt he knows how to be a younger cousin either! You just have to learn together, and isn’t that exciting? It won’t even be that hard. We were all friends before! Best friends, even.

Sizhui was going to take Zizhen's letter and shove it somewhere even the bright Lotus Pier sunlight couldn't reach.

"You have to imagine your arms are splitting the waves, the smoother the motion, the better." Jin Ling instructed, standing with his chin high and looking far too proud for someone who was failing so bitterly at being a teacher. At least in Sizhui's opinion. "It's like the water is chilled fat. It's easier to cut through a slice with the long length of a butcher's knife rather than stabbing in the middle of it. Using the smallest width of your body to cut through the water is much better than slapping it with your whole hand!"

Sizhui didn't like that the explanation made some sense. He should though, really. *My cousin isn't a half bad teacher. I'm the elder. Be proud.* That's what Zizhen would do with his little sisters, right? He would tell them about how wonderful they were. Lan Qiren would have told Sizhui to not be so prideful, accept the criticism and grow. He'd then turn around and yell at Zizhen for being boastful, so surely somewhere in the middle was a better place to lay.

"You're a good swimming teacher," Sizhui said, hiding the effort it took for him to say that with what was allowed as a smile for the Lan, standing on the sand for a moment to do so. "And I thank you for your guidance. Have you taught many before?"

Jin Ling seemed to get angrier. "At least you're getting *somewhat* better. But you're no Jiang until you can swim for at least an hour and still be laughing."

It took all his years with Hanguang-Jun not to react to that. He hid a shocked (or perhaps annoyed) breath with a smooth stroke forward of his arm, pulling his body through the lake water with some strength. Who swam for so long? Why? *It's a Jiang thing*, they told him, but did living on a lake truly mean they had to spend so much time with the fishes?

"You're looking stronger at it," Jin Ling said. "But you look so cross."

"I am not cross."

"You look cross the way Hanguang-Jun does." Jin Ling scoffed. "You realize swimming is supposed to be fun, don't you?"

Sizhui pulled himself up onto the dock, arms sore, and sat himself next to Jin Ling. He pulled his robes out of his belt and began to ring them out over the lake's edge, keeping his breath nice and steady. He wasn't cross, he was just tired. That was all.

"Are there really no places to swim in Gusu?" Jin Ling asked. "I know I didn't see any during lectures, but *still*."

"There is a lake in Caiyi," Sizhui said. "But I don't believe Lan Qiren approves of the involved immodesty."

"Immodesty." Jin Lin snickered. "We're dressed just fine. It's just fun."

"Perhaps it's fun for those who have been doing it for so long."

"Oh, come on!" His cousin protested. "You feel weightless. You can splash around. You race. You see who can hold their breath for longer. It's *fun*."

Sizhui nodded. "I'm sure it is great fun for you."

Jin Ling scoffed. "What does it matter what Lan Qiren thinks, anyway? He's not the sect leader."

"He is very well respected," Sizhui said. He stood, putting a hand to his hair to try and wring that out as well. Jin Ling followed him up, but only the hems of his robes were wet, having been sat on the dock. "He is still in charge of most of the education and takes care of some of the other work as well. Zewu-Jun is only half out of seclusion and I -"

"You said I was a good teacher." Jin Ling protested. He stuck out his finger. "I didn't say the lesson was over!"

“We have been swimming for so long! Or at least I have,” Sizhui insisted. “Uncle Jiang said my body should rest and recuperate after swimming, and – “

“And what? You have such better things to do?”

Sizhui shot him a look as he put his hair back down. It was not streaming lake water anymore, and once he changed some of his robes, he would be okay. He might need to tie his hair further back to dare look at his father’s talisman work again, but that would be fine enough. Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“Fine, fine, so *proving we’re cousins* is more intriguing than swimming now. That doesn’t mean you can just take off when you’re bored of swimming.”

Sizhui started walking back towards his quarters, hands clasped behind his back. He hated walking in wet robes, he decided. The sopping cloth clung in weird places, folding in on itself and *squishing* as he moved. Did his father enjoy this feeling? Or was it just something he put up with in order to *splash around* like Jin Ling said was so fun? Jin Ling chased after him, bolting off the docks and not stopping until he was should and shoulder with him on the walk back.

“Sect Leader Jiang has stated very clearly he sees us as cousins,” Sizhui said. “Even if it's not, those talismans have shown me *something*. I need to find out if they are true or not.”

“You have to at least let me dismiss you from swimming then.”

“These are not official lessons,” Sizhui pointed out. “I’m sure it is only Sect Leader Jiang wanting-“

He wasn’t sure what it was Sect Leader Jiang wanted. He hoped it was something kind, even if the man wasn’t quite known for his kindness.

“Wanting you not to *drown* while in his care?” Jin Ling pointed out. “He and Hanguang-Jun aren’t exactly best friends. It won’t take much to start another ridiculous trade dispute because they refuse to talk to each other again.”

“I’m not going to fall off a bridge and drown,” Sizhui said. He frowned, defending, “and my foster father can be reasoned with. He’s very reasonable.”

“Except with Uncle Cheng.” Jin Ling said. “They barely ever speak, even when they *have* to at conferences. Surely you’ve noticed that?”

“Not really. I’ve been watching them mail each other three times a year for all I can remember.”

“Oh, really?” Jin Ling bolted forward again, hopping onto the porch in front of Sizhui’s quarters. He stood firm, crossing his arms and preventing Sizhui from stepping in. “Have you really watched that? Or have you watched Uncle Cheng send *one line* about you a few times, and Hanguang-Jun never write back? Or were you *me*, at those conferences, watching them refuse to look at each other while some other disciple tries to figure out what the problem is and some roundabout way to trade between the sects?”

Sizhui narrowed his eyes for a moment. He had always assumed Lan Wangji wrote Sect Leader Jiang back, because that was the polite thing to do. Lan Wangji wasn’t always *polite*, sure, he was known to toss some brutal retorts when he felt it was deserved or if someone wasn’t qualified to discuss things with him. Sizhui still thought, as a sect leader, Jiang Cheng did deserve a letter of response, right?

“Uncle Cheng isn’t some paragon of reason,” Jin Ling said. “And I’d wager your Lan Wangji has never quite been reasonable when it came to him. Otherwise it might not have taken a decade and a half for you to get here.”

“I didn’t mean to offend.” Sizhui extended his hands forward, bowing. “Do you mind stepping aside so I may enter?”

Jin Ling did and Sizhui stepped through. He put his hand to the door, ready to say *good bye, thanks for the swim lessons now I feel like over boiled congee*, but Jin Ling stuck his foot forward, stopping the door in its path. “What are you doing? I’m coming in.”

“Jin Ling,” Sizhui protested.

“Lan Sizhui.” Jin Ling sneered his name. “What the hell.”

“I’m going to change into dry robes and then – “

“Yeah, and then you’re messing with the talismans. Did you think I wouldn’t know?”

“I assumed you did.”

“So what the hell?” Jin Ling said before shoving his way in, like he owned the place. As far as Sizhui knew, he didn’t, but it wasn’t quite Lan Like to try and shove the other teen out of his room. He shut the door behind him, frowning at Jin Ling.

“The issue isn’t that you know,” Sizhui tried to explain. “But Zhou Yun once said that my father blew off his eyebrows creating these. It could be dangerous.”

“Yeah, *and?*” Jin Ling protested. “We’re cultivators. And supposedly we’re both Jiang. We attempt the impossible. We breathe danger!”

“We’re family now,” Sizhui said, ignoring the *supposedly* that Jin Ling kept throwing around. “And I’m the elder. This could be very dangerous, and you –“

“Oh, hold the fuck on,” Jin Ling flustered, stomping his foot again. “You better not be trying to say you want to be the *protective big brother?!?*”

“Well,” Sizhui frowned. “I am the elder.”

“You! You!” Jin Ling stuttered. “You! That doesn’t matter!”

“I’m three years older than you, Jin Ling, it would be my job to guide and instruct and protect.”

“It is not!”

“That is the job of every elder family member,” Sizhui said. “Maybe I’m not great at it yet, but I do hope to be better at it someday.”

“I am not a ***baby***,” Jin Ling said. He stopped, only for a moment, to swerve back and point at him. “In fact, it will be my job to protect you!”

Sizhui could just imagine the massive eye-roll Jingyi would wear at that. *Quick, the Young Mistress is spouting nonsense.* “And how do you figure that?”

“Because I am going to be a sect leader.” He clicked his heels together, standing taller. “You’re a disciple, but I’ll be in charge of everything. It will be my job to keep you safe, to keep you out of trouble, and to keep you fed and sheltered and all of that!”

“Jin Ling.”

“Nuh-uh!” He said. “Qin Su has been counting the days until my eighteenth birthday so she can step down as regent, and from then on you’ll be my responsibility, not the other way around.”

“I’m a Lan,” Sizhui resisted the urge to put his hands on his hips. “Lan Wangji only allowed me to come here with the promise I will go home. I’m not going to join the Jin.”

Jin Ling raised his eyebrows. "You can't be serious. That was the deal?"

"What's wrong with that? Gusu is my home."

"The only time someone would make you make such a promise is when that someone knows you'll find out something that will make you never want to go home again." Jin Ling said.

"Otherwise he'd just assume that of course, you'll go home."

Sizhui narrowed his eyes. Only slightly, of course, his face as otherwise as plain as a Lan's should be. *Don't smile foolishly. Don't sneer for no reason. Don't laugh for no reason. Don't wallow.* Despite all the rules on how to govern his face, he couldn't sure what one he was holding back, aside from a great curiosity.

And a great bitterness.

"I cannot guess why Lan Wangji would ask such a promise of me," Sizhui said. "Do not make assumptions of others."

"You can't make assumptions of others, but I certainly can." Jin Ling said. He seemed to take it as an invitation. He picked up some of Lan Sizhui's robes and tossed them over a privacy curtain before starting to pace, one hand behind his back, the other pointing around as he went about. Sizhui sighed and went behind the curtain. It seemed he couldn't get rid of Jin Ling now.

"He knew you were coming here, where your dad spent his childhood. This isn't Gusu, he knows the Jiangs just *love* gossip, and they'd talk about him. Lan Wangji had to know if you got here you'd learn about your dad."

"Of course, he did," Lan Sizhui said. He hung up the wet robes to dry, and began preparing the dry ones. *That much is obvious, he wanted to say, shall we go over colors and shapes next?*

Dear Jingyi,

If I don't get permission for you to come soon, I might lose my mind.

“Obviously, he’s not going to mind if you find something out that puts Uncle Cheng in a bad light,” Jin Ling said. “So whatever it is, it’s going to be something *he’s* ashamed of as well.”

“He’s *Hanguang-Jun*,” Sizhui pointed out. He couldn’t imagine the man known as a paragon of all that is light and good in this world doing something dastardly.

“They were teenagers once, too,” Jin Ling said. Sizhui, once again dressed, pushed the curtain to the side just to glare at him. Jin Ling seemed utterly unphased. “In fact, they were teenagers during a war.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“A lot of rules go out the window when there’s a war on,” Jin Ling said. “At least so far as I have heard. Besides, Hanguang-Jun must have done *something* to make Uncle hate him so.”

“And what exactly do you think that would be?” Sizhui sighed, not really wanting an answer.

“Maybe they were both in love with your mother.”

“My *mother*?”

“At least I’m coming up with theories,” Jin Ling said. “Isn’t that what the talismans are for, then, to find out? Maybe they were all in love with your mother, but it’s your dad who landed her, and they both hated him so much that when he died, it just transferred to hating each other.”

“Ridiculous,” Sizhui said, grabbing talisman paper from the desk. His tone perfectly matched Hanguang-Jun’s, in his opinion. His foster father would be proud.

Jin Ling looked over his shoulder, eyeing the paper. “Use a different one. Maybe we can hear something. What about that one?”

“No, I tried that one before you got here. It didn’t do anything.” Sizhui said. He ruffled through a few before settling on one that seemed more legible. “Here.”

He held it up between them. Jin Ling focused, his eyebrows furring in tight as he looked it over. He’d seen a similar expression on Jiang Cheng, Sizhui realized, when the man was polishing his sword, but his mind was somewhere else, presumably fighting an argument with someone who wasn’t there and he was winning. Sizhui raised his hand. “Ready?”

Jin Ling nodded and did the same. Unlike before, the quarters around them didn’t erupt into black nothingness. Instead, the walls around them faded. The smooth, polished wood curved out into dark stone. The floors crunched, hard dirt and dead leaves biting under their feet.

Behind them wasn’t sunshine, perse. The light was gray, and there was a cold feeling to the creeping, sharp shadows of aged, untended trees. In front of them was a large slap of rock, covered in hay and matting. A makeshift sleeping pallet on top of stone.

Sizhui bent down. A wooden toy sword. A stuffed dragon.

A folded bamboo butterfly.

Jin Ling crouched next to him, glancing up and around before turning to the toys. “Wow.”

“Yeah,” Sizhui agreed softly.

“So, if any of this is real, then your dad is an asshole who thought it was okay to take a toddler spelunking.”

“Shush,” Sizhui said. “It’s real. I know it is now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The butterfly,” Sizhui said. “I still have it.”

“You think this is real based on one toy butterfly?”

“I’m telling you. I still have it. I can show it to you when the memory ends,” Sizhui stood. It was just a cave. An unremarkable cave, right? So why was it so cold? Why were his toys there? He turned away from the plateau of stone. Just a cave, he told himself. An unremarkable cave. With very creepy-looking shadows and trees out of the mouth of it.

“Look,” Jin Ling said. Sizhui turned. There was another plateau of stone, with an un-sturdy looking chair by it, the twining falling apart and hooked around the joints of it. Handmade, Sizhui realized, and not by a professional carpenter, just someone doing his best. Sizhui approached.

There were more talismans, and the handwriting that had begun to look heartwarmingly familiar marked the papers. His father was a genius – Sizhui couldn’t make heads or tails of most of the markings. All that it told him was that – “We must have stayed here. For a while.”

The cave faded, and the bitterness in his chest grew. It made his eyes sting and burn. He’d seen in the other memories the threadbare clothes, the uneven fabrics, how bare their hair had been. He thought perhaps his father was struggling, but not *living in a cave* struggling. Why would he be there? *It’s a sad story*, the Jiang disciples told him. Sizhui grabbed the papers again, shuffling through them, no clue what he was looking for, but he would find something. He picked one at random, struggling to keep his shaking hands from tearing the papers apart.

“Sizhui.”

“No.” He said. “I need to know.”

Jin Ling was still. “I’m not stopping you.”

Good. There was no reason to stop. Not now. In reality. Sizhui could have all the time in the world. He just felt so rushed. It was decided then, he would not stop until he heard his father’s voice. He held the two known half talismans together, comparing them to the others. If one could show setting and another people, then he needed one that looked nothing like those, or at least as far from similar.

“The butterfly is in my luggage,” Sizhui said. Jin Ling didn’t interrupt. He stood to the side, knowing what mourning looked like. “It is packed at the bottom. On the right-hand side.”

For a moment, all that could be heard were the papers ruffling in his hands. “I trust you.”

That was enough.

It was not the first talisman he tried, nor was it the second. Sizhui told himself, *it’s my father’s writing. Surely, I can know his intention.* But a few days of study, a week, did not give him so much insight. The bitterness tightened his heart. He just couldn’t give up, even if it meant he would not sleep before nine.

He and Jin Ling raised their hands, what had to be for the tenth time.

“Will the rich man ever come here again?”

“Did you hear that?” Sizhui asked. Jin Ling nodded, and he couldn’t help but gasp. It was his voice, but so young, so high, so unsure.

“Hm? Who’s the rich man?”

Sizhui’s eyes widened, and that tight iron grip in his chest finally released. He could almost recognize it, like a voice from a dream that had faded so long ago.

“The rich man from a while ago! In the blue! And his white ribbon was on his face!”

“You mean Lan Zhan? You really like him that much, don’t you?”

“Did your father just use Hanguang-Jun’s *birth name*?” Jin Ling turned to him, a mix of disgust and shock on his face. Sizhui nodded slowly. His tiny voice was complaining, asking for something to be given back, with the sound of tiny feet hitting a hard stone path, or perhaps tightly packed and overly dry dirt. He had never heard anyone use his foster father’s birth name, not even Lan Qiren or Zewu-Jun.

“No, I won’t give it back. Not unless you say you like me as much as you like Lan Zhan.” His father teased. His voice was laughing. His voice was loving. Happy.

Maybe it might explain why it was Hanguang-Jun who took him in, rather than Jiang Cheng. Maybe, but certainly they couldn’t have been as close as brothers.

“I love you, too!” His little voice promised. Sizhui choked on air, clutching a hand to his chest.

“Okay, here it is.”

“Will the rich man come back or not?” Sizhui almost laughed. Did he exclusively call Hanguang-Jun *rich man* back then? Was it only because of his silken clothes? Thinking on the threadbare rags he had seen himself and his father in, it might make sense. It just didn’t stop the embarrassment from coloring his cheeks.

The laughter left his father's voice. *"Probably not."*

"Why not?"

"In this world, everyone has their own things to do. Lan Zhan is a Lan. He'll be busy with his sect, and the path that they walk."

"Oh."

His father's voice turned up, and the sound of footsteps took up again.

"Who cares about the crowded, broad avenue? I'll stick to my single log bridge until it's dark end!"

The echoes of long-ended footfalls faded and Sizhui couldn't help the choked noise that came out from his mouth. He wasn't crying but he was so close to it. Don't cry needlessly, don't disturb others with pointless noise. None of this was pointless, he believed. His father was real. His voice was sweet like honey, sharp like a stinger, and he could *hear* it.

He needed more.

Dear Jingyi, Dear Zizhen

I don't know if we can do this without you.

Break My Walls Down Stone by Stone

Chapter Summary

“Wait,” Jin Ling said, the laughter in his shoulder’s starting to still. “Why was it just he in the Ancestry Hall?”

The spark in Jiang Cheng’s eyes died almost immediately. He stiffened and gave Jin Ling a sour look. “Your grandmother wasn’t fond of him.”

“Weren’t you punished too? You pushed the teacher in together.” Jin Ling asked.

“It is not of great importance.”

“Was it often like that?” Jin Ling pressed. “Him punished and you getting away with it?”

“Yan-na.”

“Yanli. I’m your auntie Yanli. But you’re so close!”

“Yan-na.”

“Yanli! Oh, you’re just too cute, aren’t you?”

“Ah, don’t be too sweet to him. He’ll get spoiled!”

“I can’t believe you became a parent before me. I’m older.”

“But look at you...”

“I just needed you to see my wedding....”

Jin Ling had cried. Sizhui politely turned his head, trying to give his cousin as much privacy as he could. Why had he not realized that his ‘aunt’ and Jin Ling’s mother might crop up in his memories? If his father was Jiang Cheng’s brother, then it should have been obvious. He should have realized. In the end, he left his quarters, giving Jin Ling as much privacy as he could.

The implications could be dealt with another day.

Jiang Cheng dropped a pot in the middle of the table. Sizhui blinked in mild surprise. What Jiang Cheng had said his first morning had rung true. For the most part, he brewed his own tea, he made his own congee. Sometimes, Jin Ling would join him, or sometimes he might find Jin Ling had made his own and would ‘allow’ Sizhui to join him. The flavors that Jin Ling made were often overwhelming, the tea far stronger or the congee spiced with something that fought with his cheeks. Sizhui was glad he had allowed Ouyang Zizhen to select the gift of tea he had given Jiang Cheng – there was no way he could have picked a flavor that was up to par with the flavor requirements of Lotus Pier.

It was why he was a bit apprehensive when Jiang Cheng stated they were having dinner as a family that night. He wasn’t sure what he expected. Jin Ling, having recovered from the latest memory, seemed almost bored. He even had an elbow propped up on his knee, like this was some kind of game, while Sizhui sat as Lan Qiren would have approved of. *Respect those who share your table. Sit with strong posture and hide your feet.* Jiang Cheng, however, didn’t serve the pot as Lan Qiren would have liked, plopping it down and having Sizhui and Jin Ling get their own bowls.

Clean white painted porcelain, shining, but clearly shaped well like they were eating from a lotus blossom.

“Thank you, Uncle,” Jin Ling said, grabbing his bowl and began serving. He seemed to recognize the soup, perhaps some favorite of his. Jiang Cheng sat between them and turned, bowing his head to Sizhui.

“His mother made this,” Jiang Cheng said. “It was your father’s favorite.”

“Thank you for sharing it with me,” Sizhui said. He waited for Jin Ling to finish, and at Jiang Cheng’s urging, served himself. The broth was dark, the vegetable and meat well cooked and more thoroughly seasoned than anything in Gusu would dare to be. He tried some of the broth and quickly forced his face to still. *Why was it spicy?* Someone laughed at him, and he looked up too late to figure out who.

“I should have known,” Jiang Cheng said. If they could tell his pain so easily he really needed to work on his ability to hide shock. Lan Wangji would be disappointed. “Next time I will try and keep some chili oil out. Though your father could never have it spicy enough.”

“This...” Sizhui’s voice was *rough*, man. “Was his favorite meal?”

“Yes. I suppose we were lucky it was my sister’s favorite meal to make. I’m unsure which came first. If I had to guess, it being her favorite. She would make it every time she tried to cheer him up.”

“Was he a gloomy child?”

Jiang Cheng snorted. “The opposite.”

Sizhui tilted his head, urging for Jiang Cheng to go on. The most he’d gotten from those around Lotus Pier was the fact that it was ‘a sad story’ and ‘shouldn’t you be enjoying the beauty of Lotus Pier?’ They had yet to even say his *name*. What was so sad about a name?

Dear Jingyi,

*If someone tells me to enjoy the Lotus Pier Sunset one more time,
I should not be held responsible for the sword polish that gets thrown at their heads.*

It was far more easy for him to enjoy the sunrise, come on people.

“Your father,” Jiang Cheng took a deep breath in, clearly trying to prepare himself for something. “He was wild. Very wild. My mother used to blame it on how he *ran wild* with the street dogs as a child, or his wild parents. But he was always trying to make us laugh. We’d get in so much trouble for it.”

“You?” Jin Ling scoffed. “You were a trouble maker?”

“We were young!” Jiang Cheng excused. “And we were brothers. We wound each other up. It was what brothers *did*. There was this time I had convinced our history teacher to give our lessons in the boats. Your father got him monologuing about what terrible students we were and when he turned to face the horizon, we snuck up on him and pushed him in the lake.”

Jin Ling snickered, lotus root hanging from his mouth as he tried to cover it up with the back of his wrist. Sizhui did offer a smile, because from the fond memories clearly sparking behind the sect leader’s eyes, he could tell this was something *happy*. He just knew that’s why Lan Qiren never would have let Sizhui into the Lans, not if he had known who he was. ‘Disobedient brats, the lot of them,’ Lan Qiren would have said. He’d always had some grand issue with the Jiang, and their tempers.

“Three days later and I could still find your father kneeling on rice grains and holding the discipline stick in the Ancestry Hall. We were lucky mother’s temper cooled so quickly.”

“Wait,” Jin Ling said, the laughter in his shoulder’s starting to still. “Why was it just he in the Ancestry Hall?”

The spark in Jiang Cheng’s eyes died almost immediately. He stiffened and gave Jin Ling a sour look. “Your grandmother wasn’t fond of him.”

“Weren’t you punished too? You pushed the teacher in together.” Jin Ling asked.

“It is not of great importance.”

“Was it often like that?” Jin Ling pressed. “Him punished and you getting away with it?”

“No one in this family *got away* with anything,” Jiang Cheng snapped. Sizhui nearly flinched at the venom, but Jin Ling didn’t seem to care at all. They were right about one thing, all the warnings he’d heard about the Jiangs. The family was full of passion and fire could not be burned by fire. “You’ll understand that when you are older.”

Sizhui took another spoonful of broth. He wished his mouth could not be burned by fire.

“I am older!” Jin Ling pointed out. “In a year I’ll be sect leader of the Jin!”

“Not for any good reason!”

“You were a sect leader by then, too!”

“Yes, and not for any good reason!”

Dear Zizhen,

*This family communicates by fighting.
I fear I may be flying a bit too close to the sun.*

“If I may,” Sizhui said. Two angry men, the younger had pressed his hands to the table and nearly stood completely up to try and make himself bigger, turned to stare at him. “Sect Leader Jiang. Uncle. I have been very grateful to spend this time here at Lotus Pier. It’s beauty is everything that has been said.”

Jiang Cheng glowered. Sizhui could see the gears turning, like he was wondering if Sizhui was asking to leave.

“It’s only that usually around his point, my friends would come and visit at Gusu. I miss them greatly. They are very fond of Jin Ling as well, and so I was wondering if perhaps they could come here?”

“Oh, *no*, are you talking about Jingyi?”

“Both Jingyi and Zizhen are very fond of you,” Sizhui said which wasn’t entirely a lie. “Zizhen called us all best friends.”

“Zizhen is a-“

“You have friends?” Jiang Cheng asked, head turning right back to face Jin Ling. His cousin sputtered. “Why didn’t you tell me you had friends?”

“What?” Jin Ling protested. “It’s not like that!”

“You should have told me,” Jiang Cheng insisted. He raised his tea cup, rolling his eyes like this was the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard. Just like that, the fight that had been brewing was gone. Perhaps a Jiang fire was quickly snuffed out, as well? Sizhui couldn’t tell. “Of course, they may come.”

“Thank you, Uncle,” Sizhui bowed in his seat. “They’ll be glad to know.”

My dear friends,

The sooner you can come the better.

“Here,” Back in the quarters, Sizhui sat at on his bed. His father’s former bed. Just by his hand he could see the small carving his father had put into the wood, a smiling face looking up at him. Sizhui tilted his head back slightly and Jin Ling combed through his hair. “You really won’t let me put gold beading in it?”

“Do not show off what others do not have,” Sizhui said plainly. “Besides, I’m not a Jin.”

“Not *yet*,” Jin Ling said. “Besides, I’m pretty sure *no red* is pretty high up on the Lan dress code, isn’t it?”

“I won’t go back wearing it,” Sizhui said. “I just wanted to see.”

“Alright, alright, you’ll get to see.” Jin Ling finished tying the red ribbon into his hair and sat to the side. He stared at Sizhui with judgement on his face, eyes slightly narrowed.

“Well?” Sizhui asked. “Do I look like him?”

“Mmm,” Jin Ling said. “I mean, he had those freckles. But you have a one here, like him.”

Jin Ling pointed to the solo mark marring Sizhui’s face, and he let out a small laugh. “I know I don’t. But... maybe his hair or something?”

Jin Ling shrugged. “I think maybe you have his eyes? They always seem a bit bright. Brighter than Uncle Cheng’s anyway.”

His smile grew again. “Thank you. That does mean a lot.”

Sizhui stood up, and crossed the room towards the mirror. He took his hair, brushing it over his shoulder to see how the red ribbon mixed in his hair. It did sort of look like the memories, though his father’s hair never seemed so.... Neat? They had been in rags, nothing like the Lan Disciple Silks that Sizhui wore even now. His father probably didn’t have someone to brush and oil his hair, Sizhui realized. That’s why it was frizzy in the memories, the pony tail a bit folded to the side. It was the mark of a man who did his own hair, the dominant hand pulling it to one side on instinct.

Had his father died so Sizhui could have help with his hair and silk on his arms? Sizhui sighed and let his hair rest where it was. Jin Ling followed, approaching him from behind in the cloudy, silver surface. “You look fine.”

“That... that wasn’t my concern.”

“Yeah, I can tell.” Jin Ling said. “I bet you have his cheek bones or something. Or even just his-“

Jin Ling shut his trap. Sizhui frowned, “What?”

“Well, I was going to say his *personality*,” Jin Ling said, before gesturing to the totality of Sizhui.

“Hm,” Sizhui let his eyes drift to the side. “I’m not wild. I’m not a genius. I’m not cheerful.”

“You are plenty cheerful,” Jin Ling said. Sizhui rolled his eyes to Jin Ling in the silver surface. “What? For a *Lan* you might be the cheeriest thing that there is. The only one who might have you beat is Jingyi, and I hate to tell you, he’s not cheery at all. He’s just... sassy.”

“I may tell him you said that.”

Jin Ling’s eyes snapped up wide. “Don’t you dare!”

Sizhui hummed playfully, going back to his father’s working desk. They had set the two working half-talismans to the side, and Sizhui’s own scrawl had joined some of the mess, with fresh, clean pages unmarred or stained by time in a neat pile off to the side. No books about talismans had anything useful, not when it came to work like his father’s. Much less were any notes about *joining* the two. Sizhui just had to hope either Zizhen or Jingyi would come with some ideas of their own. There was one gnawing worry he refused to acknowledge: what if his father never joined the two talismans together because it couldn’t be done?

Sizhui had only once dared to voice the concern, but Jin Ling had taken it and tossed it out the window. *He was a Jiang. He would never give up on attempting the impossible.*

His father was a Jiang. Sizhui couldn't give up either. It was a father son mission – father, son and nephew and some of their friends, but *still*. It would happen. He picked up the one tht allowed them to see the people. As much as he wanted to hear what they were saying, after what had happened with Jin Ling's mother, he could only hope for something a bit different. Maybe they could see the tragic Jiang Yanli as well. Perhaps it would be something to share.

“Are you ready?” Sizhui said. Jin Ling nodded.

It wasn't what he hoped. He did see Jiang Cheng, though, as their world went otherwise dark. He stood there in purple, hair tied back with a silver lotus ornament. Sizhui was in his arms, this time. And he wasn't in rags. Instead, Sizhui was dressed in the same shades or purple, his face....

Not sad. But his eyes were wide, like he was trying to see anything and everything. Little Sizhui was confused, at the very least, and while Jiang Cheng held him, he didn't hold him in return. He watched, a few disciples in the distance practicing.

“What is this?” Jin Ling asked. Sizhui could only guess. “Oh, holy shit.”

Sizhui turned. Amongst the blackness of his memories, Hanguang-Jun stood. There was not a single trace of Lan blue in his clothing, nothing but the mourning white he'd been wearing for as long as Sizhui had known him. Or, as these new memories stood, at least for the past sixteen years. He'd worn Lan blue before, hadn't he? In the other memory?

Hanguang-Jun looked pissed. Not even opening his mouth to speak, he had Bichen out, nearly sparking with the fury of how he'd pulled it from its shaft.

“Oh, *shit*,” Jin Ling said again. Jiang Cheng snarled, taking half a step back, covering Sizhui with his arms as he said something, the fury surely matching that on his face. He lowered one

hand, Zidian starting to spark. “Oh, *shit!*”

Hanguang-Jun said something. Nothing long, perhaps a single short sentence. Jiang Cheng said something back, laughing with no real mirth as he tossed his head back. No, not a laugh, nothing funny. He was scoffing at the Lan. That made some sense. According to the disciples in the back, they were in Lotus Pier.

Hanguang-Jun had come to Lotus Pier and pulled a weapon on a sect leader. He’d pulled a *weapon* on a sect leader, who was holding a child. “What is happening?”

Jiang Cheng cracked Zidian, the full whip bursting out with such fury, Sizhui’s body practically felt the silent *crack!*

Hanguang-Jun didn’t react. His lip barely furled, and he stepped forward, raising the sword. Not to his neck, no, not risking the area so close to Sizhui’s head where a slashing of sword would have been required. He raised it instead just to Jiang Cheng’s stomach.

Hanguang-Jun said something, and whatever it was, seemed to chill the fury in Jiang Cheng. They were still, so still. But slowly, Zidian retracted up Jiang Cheng’s hand, and he put Sizhui on the ground. Hanguang-Jun kneeled, and from his sleeve, produced the same bamboo butterfly that had Sizhui so concerned just days ago. A-Yuan stepped forward, going to Hanguang-Jun’s open arms, and said two little words.

Rich man?

Sizhui could tell that much at least. Hanguang-Jun picked him up, keeping Bichen out as he glared again at Jiang Cheng. He turned, walking away as the disciples and Jiang Cheng watched. They slowly faded out, like smoke wiped out by wind, as Hanguang-Jun left with the little Sizhui before the memory faded out, returning to the warm wood of his quarters.

“Oh, hell, oh what the heck,” Jin Ling said.

“Did...” Sizhui sat at the desk, a hand on the table to ease his way down. “Why did Hanguang-Jun?”

“*How?*” Jin Ling protested.

The short phrase that Hanguang-Jun must have said – because that was *not* Lan Wangji that day. That was a light-bearing lord, ruling that in his path and making demands. That was a man who stormed a sect and somehow *got away with it*. Sizhui knew what he said now.

Give him to me.

So what the hell had Lan Wangji said after that? That made Jiang Cheng give in?

“Why did Uncle do it?” Sizhui asked. “What could have possibly happened?”

“How did they not go to *war?*” Jin Ling asked. Sizhui looked up, hands shaking into his chest. How did they manage not to go to war? Lan Wangji had practically stormed the castle and taken a child. Were they just so mad at each other that seemed normal?

“What the hell happened between them?” Jin Ling asked, collapsing on to the bed. Sizhui could only shake his head.

What the hell happened, indeed?

Together We Could Quiet All The Noises

Chapter Summary

Dear Jingyi,

I am having thoughts that may be unfilial. What's worse is I do not feel bad about it.

"Rich man?"

Silence.

"Can you tell me a story?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not a story-teller."

"Oh. But dad always told me stories?"

Silence.

"If we get him, he can show you how!"

"I'm afraid he cannot do that."

"Why not?"

"I am the one who will care for you now."

"That's what the other man said. In purple!"

"He was incorrect. I cannot tell you stories. . . but I could perhaps play you a song? One your father liked."

Music played – a song that Sizhui recognized. He hadn't known that, the song Lan Wangji played until his fingers turned red, that he had played so often to help Sizhui fall asleep was something that his father had listened to. No one else knew the song. Jingyi never recognized it. Sect Leader Lan Xichen did not seem to know it either. Sizhui had once asked, and it seemed Zewu-Jun knew some of the notes and knew it was something his brother played, but he was not able to replicate it, nor did he have any clue of the name. Sizhui had accepted it was some Cloud Recesses music, but perhaps, more specifically, something special to Hanguang-Jun.

This memory must have been from after his father, whoever he was, had died, and perhaps after the evens he and Jin Ling had seen, when Hanguang-Jun took Sizhui from Jiang Cheng's arms. Perhaps it was their first night together as a family, the first time Hanguang-Jun had tucked him into bed and helped him fall asleep. Sizhui looked to the side of the bed. The carving was there, two people staring into each other's eyes. It seemed appropriate for the music that fell over the quarters.

It was no mastery of art, but for what seemed to be a child's work, it was surprisingly sturdy. He couldn't imagine taking a knife to wood so young and carving it out without a stray mark, a wrong cut. Sizhui wanted to cut it free from the rest of the bed frame, hide the missing piece with the soft Jiang teal curtains, and bring it home with him. He wanted to bring so much back from this room to his place in Cloud Recesses. But that would be stealing, wouldn't it? Just because it was all his father's, didn't give him the right. Did it?

They said his father lost his parents young, too, so young that he couldn't recall their faces. That he'd been a child when he carved this. *Those are probably his parents. My grandparents.*

"I hate him," Jin Ling said. Sizhui looked up, blinking at his cousin. The young sect leader clenched his fist, staring out across the pier, the water that surrounded his father's quarters on all sides. "I really do."

"Jin Ling?"

"No." Jin Ling said, turning to Sizhui. "He stole you."

"We don't have all of the information."

"He had no right to you." Jin Ling insisted. The music was faded now, leaving them alone to the sounds of waves. "We saw it, Sizhui. Uncle had you, he took you out of those *garbage*, trash robes and into proper ones. Ones worthy of his sect. He was going to raise you. Our uncle, your family by every right. Who the hell does Hanguang-Jun think he is? He had no right to you. You should have been raised here."

Sizhui looked down. His Lan robes stuck out in Lotus Pier like a sore thumb. Everything was warm wood, rich purples, airy teals in the curtains, in the bed covers. It was warm and intense. The food was heavier on the tongue, the manner lighter in laughter.

“We would have been cousins.” Jin Ling said.

“We are cousins.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it.” Jin Ling snapped. “I spent half my life here. The only child of the Jiang Sect. It was just me and Uncle, and maybe the other Jiang Disciples when there were finally some my age, but they never stuck around. The rest of the time I was in Lanling, with... with-“

Sizhui knew what he meant. Jin Guangyao. The once respected Chief Cultivator who had his own hand in raising Jin Ling. The Tragedy of Jiang Yanli was a story only outshone by that of Jin Regent Qin Su catching her own husband murdering their child in his bed, followed by the great web of lies that began to unfold shortly after.

Some say Chief Nie Huaisang was the sole reason Qin Su had been able to discover it. Other said that was crazy. Some said that he had killed his sworn brother Nie Mingjue, which was what lead Nie Huaisang to helping her. Sizhui had once heard that Jin Guangyao had even murdered his father by way of prostitution, but he had no clue how that even worked. There were other lies too, but no one told the young about the massive deception. Sizhui only knew that they weren’t being told most of the story, none of them were.

Jin Ling had been twelve at the time of Jin Guangyao’s downfall. Old enough to have spent most of his child being the ‘spare heir,’ expecting Qin Su’s son to take the throne, before suddenly being pushed into the spotlight. Before finding out a beloved uncle was a heartless killer. Before finding out he’d never be one in the crowd ever again.

“You would have been there for me. I know you would have. And I would have been there for you.” Jin Ling said. “Hell, you probably would have been Uncle’s *heir*. He’s still not married; I’m starting to doubt that he ever will. We... we could have gone through this *together*. Even if you weren’t his heir, we would have been friends who stuck by each other for all our lives.”

“We were still friends,” Sizhui said. “Does that not mean more? I still chose to be your friend thinking we had no relation.”

“It’s still different!” Jin Ling insisted, stomping a foot down, pushing gilded robes back with the wind from his movements. Sizhui looked down again.

He understood. Jin Ling had needed support from a family member, from a *brother*. Not from a sect leader uncle who wasn’t allowed to interfere in the first place from the politics. Sizhui could have been that, and perhaps from Jin Ling’s point of view, was supposed to be that. Sizhui had already told him that he would try to be a good cousin and a strong elder family member. A good big brother. Faced with the evidence of what could have been, perhaps it was just what Jin Ling had deserved.

“What if this isn’t even what Hanguang-Jun was afraid that you’d discover?” Jin Ling asked. “Are we sure *kidnapping you* is the worst that he’s done?”

“I was not kidnapped.” Sizhui protested.

“No, you were just held at sword point.”

“Hanguang-Jun ever asked for a ransom as far as we are aware. Uncle never came for me,” Sizhui paused. *Uncle never came for me*. He never ventured into Cloud Recesses looking for the nephew that was plucked from his arms. He had known that. Why did it hurt now?

Dear Zizhen,

*There’s an ache in me that I do not understand.
I wish you were here already.*

“He still *stole you* when Uncle clearly didn’t want him to take you. I hate him!” Jin Ling picked something up, a soup bowl from their lunch, and threw it hard. It splashed into the lake below, the sound echoed from the grunts of pain his cousin emitted. ‘Do not speak ill of

others when avoidable. Do not speak hurtfully for no reason' Sizhui wanted to say. But he knew the reason. It was all around them. "I never liked *Hanguang-Jun* before. I never liked him only because Uncle didn't like him, and I knew, I *knew* there had to be a reason. But now I hate him!"

Jin Ling breathed hard, like he had gone a round in sword practice. "How did he con the entire Cultivation World into calling him the light bearing lord? Like he's so good and perfect!"

"Why does he hate Uncle Jiang, as well?" Sizhui asked. "They both seemed to hate each other. Before he took me, I mean, they both..."

"Does that *matter*?"

"Yes." His words were plain. "You saw it too. Uncle was already sneering at him when he first saw Hanguang-Jun there to take me. They were clearly already against each other. And... I have to believe there is a reason he came for me. I have to believe that."

"You're not seriously planning on going back to him after this?"

"Do not break promises. I promised to return home," Sizhui said. "I did not promise to stay there."

Jin Ling stared at him for a moment before the smallest quirk grew on his lips. "Fucking Lans. And they say you have no sass."

Sizhui narrowed his eyes slightly.

"What? It's a good thing. You'll never make it in this family if you can't sass back." Jin Ling hummed in consideration for a moment. "Perhaps ask Jingyi for advice. He could make it in this family. He knows how."

This family sucked.

Sizhui shifted through the paintings. Most had signatures at the bottom from men and women alike that could not be his father, being far too famous, far too dead, or the pages far too old. He was starting to think the only ones that could possibly have been done by his father were the ones that bore no signature at all. Typical. Could he not even find his name among the stacks?

“I don’t see why any of his artwork would be in the storage rooms,” Jin Ling complained loudly. “Wouldn’t his art be hung on the walls?”

“Tell me which piece that hangs could be his and we’ll go see.”

That shut him up. At least for a moment. They said his father was an artist, and while the stick figure on his bedside didn’t say much, the expressions did. Even Jiang Cheng had seemed a bit soft when explaining. Sizhui had tried to find something on the walls, something bearing markers of pride, like ah, yes. This was drawn by our favored disciple!

There didn’t seem to be any home for his father’s accomplishments. There were markers of Jiang Cheng’s – a training sword he had used to best his teacher was hung in a great hall. A fan painted by Jiang Yanli hung by the throne room. According to Jin Ling, an award for ‘best calligraphy’ that had Jiang Cheng’s name on it was stashed in what had been his grandparents’ room, coupled with other small tokens of their childhood. But nothing mentioned a third child, adopted or otherwise. Sizhui wasn’t sure what made him more upset, that he still didn’t know his father’s name, or that they had to go hunting for evidence the man existed here in the first place.

Dear Jingyi,

I am having thoughts that may be unfilial. What’s worse is I do not feel bad about it.

“How about this?” Jin Ling said, pulling out something small. No name, so perhaps it was more likely that Sizhui’s father painted it. It was a small painting of a rabbit, done with small deliberate strokes depicting the outline of the bunny. It had red eyes and a small triangle nose, jumping over a log. A little wild in its silent movements, but somehow elegant all the same.

“What are you doing in here?”

The cousins turned. Jiang Cheng stood on the small ramp into the storage hall, brow furrowed as he looked at them. Were they not allowed to be in here?

“Bonding,” Sizhui said, which was not entirely a lie. They were in fact bonding, weren’t they?

“Sure.” Jiang Cheng said. “Do you want to say *how* you’re bonding?”

“We are looking for his father’s artwork,” Jin Ling said. “Since *clearly* none of it seems to be hung. Why are your accomplishments everywhere but your brother’s gone?”

This family was bold. This family was bold as hell. Jiang Cheng’s eyes narrowed. “It is not the first time that I have told you, your grandmother was not fond of him.”

“You don’t need to be *fond* of someone to say that they’re good at something!” Jin Ling protested. “I have no fondness in my heart for Master Lan Qiren but he is very good at pissing me off. See? Easy.”

“That is not the point you were trying to make.” Sizhui reminded.

“Bah!” Jin Ling scoffed. “At the moment, I don’t care. Why did Grandmother not like his father?”

“That’s long since over now, they are both dead.”

“Was she kind to him?” Sizhui piped up. The two looked at him, as if shocked he had raised his voice at all. “Your mother, the woman who raised him since he was a child. Was she kind

to him?”

Jiang Cheng exhaled, righting his shoulders. “No.”

Sizhui frowned.

“If it is any consolation, she was not kind to anyone. Not her husband, not her children. No one in their right mind would call Yu Ziyuan kind.”

“Was she supportive?” Sizhui asked instead. “Was she supportive of him as she may have been for you, or Jiang Yanli?”

Jin Ling was still, then, too. His cousin was angry, he was angry about a lot of things. Sizhui just wasn’t so sure why he was angry about this in particular. Jiang Cheng huffed, raising his chin a bit.

“No. She was not.”

Sizhui looked down, the silent acceptance of an answer he did not want.

Dear Jingyi,

I am not a parent, but I wonder if she deserves my unfilial feelings. I have never thought of myself as a bad child?

“We were looking for his art. You said he was an artist.” Jin Ling said.

“Ah,” Jiang Cheng stepped forward. “That is one of his.”

He gestured to the rabbit, and Jin Ling frowned. “Why was he drawing *bunnies*?”

Jiang Cheng groaned like it physically pained him. “I believe he was trying to impress someone. Or drive me *mad*. It’s no matter! What’s left of his art is here.”

Jiang Cheng moved a few panels, giving them better access to a dusty pile of free flying papers.

“What do you mean, *what’s left*? Did you toss it out?!” Jin Ling protested.

“You would do well to remember that Lotus Pier was *burned*,” Jiang Cheng gave Jin Ling a rough stare. His cousin stilled, frowning in retort but he did seem somewhat mollified. “It’s not all my mother’s fault. In fact...”

He trailed off, swallowing as if the words he had planned to say were bitter. “Never mind that. Much of what was here was burned, and we are lucky to have saved what we did. This should be his artwork, that’s what counts.”

Jiang Cheng ruffled through some of the papers. Sizhui could tell, some of them were scorched around the edges, many singed. He had noticed the smell of smoke, but it seemed like it was embedded in the wood, not like it had been anything to worry about.

“Ah-ha!” Jiang Cheng said. “I knew this one hadn’t burned. Jin Ling?”

He held it out to Jin Ling, who took it with nervous as he took it. His eyes widened, and Sizhui tilted his head in curiosity.

“Is this...?”

“Mother thought it was the best portrait,” Jiang Cheng said, clasping his hands behind his back. There was a smug look of pride, far too pleased proud. Lan Qiren would have smacked

it right off of any disciple's face should he have seen it.

“Portrait of?”

“Your mother.”

Jin Ling began to sit down, just there in the middle of the floor. Sizhui came over, putting a hand to the back of his cousin's shoulder's as if to soothe. He didn't have to be a newly discovered cousin to know that sound, the crying that would be just around the corner if someone didn't step in.

“She's...” Jin Ling's voice wobbled.

“I know.” Jiang Cheng said. “She may not have been listed as the top bachelorettes, but your mother wore kindness in every expression, and that was what made her more beautiful than any of them. Our brother knew that more than anyone.”

Sizhui could feel Jin Ling shake, just from the hand on the back of his shoulders. He peered over. His father seemed to have a distinct artistic style. Each line was confident, without so much as a hair-thick line to trace or make certain of a shape. He seemed to know exactly what he was doing without second thought. “She's lovely, Jin Ling. You have her nose.”

Jin Ling looked up. “You think?”

Sizhui smiled. “I do.”

Jiang Cheng took a small breath in and began to walk back out of the storage hall. “You were never allowed in here before for a reason. I expect now that you are older, you know how to be careful. The memories in here have survived one fire – they do not need another. They can never be returned.”

Sizhui stepped aside, only to bow deeply to the sect leader as he left. He would not dare try to take the portrait of his mother from Jin Ling, so instead, he picked up the picture of a rabbit once more. While not as emotive as the portrait, the style was quite similar, if fewer in colors and radiant design.

“Wait,” he whispered, picking the picture up closer to his face. Among the scorch marks he could just now notice the writing.

Lan Zhan!

*I knew you liked rabbits! You cannot hide from me.
May this make you smile! You have such a nice smile.*

“What?” Sizhui whispered. ‘He was trying to impress someone, or drive me mad.’ What did that have to do with this? Was his father trying to impress Hanguang-Jun? Was-?

Sizhui had a mountain of questions still, and he wasn’t sure what any of them were.

“What is it?” Jin Link asked.

“I just need to see something. Or hear it. Something!” Sizhui had almost no control over the memories he saw or heard, which was a growing irritation. He just needed to try something. They took their treasures back to the room, though left no guarantee they wouldn’t turn around and go right back.

“Wangji. Who is this?”

“Who is that?” Jin Ling asked.

“Sect Leader Lan Xichen,” Sizhui said. He never knew where to put his eyes during these. He just found himself staring up at the ceiling, as if it was from there that the voices emanated.

Still he frowned. This wasn't going to give him any answers, was it? If he played with memories all day, would he get any closer?

"This is Lan-Yuan."

"Lan-Yuan? We have no disciple named that."

"Now we do."

"Wangji?"

"Rich man! He looks like you."

Sizhui frowned. Was he going to stop calling Hanguang-Jun that any time soon? Perhaps switch to his name, that would be better.

"Hello, Little One. I am Lan Xichen. Where are your parents?"

"Me."

"Wangji. Are you trying to joke?"

"Not joking."

"Where are his parents?"

"Me."

Silence.

“Little One. Where are your mommy and daddy?”

“Rich Man says-“

“That is Lan Wangji. He is my brother.”

“He says daddy’s not here to tell me stories anymore.”

“Wangji. Is this... is his father who I think it is?”

Lan Wangji hummed.

“I do not know if this is exactly appropriate, Brother.”

“I failed him. I will not fail his son.”

Sizhui looked at the painting his hands. The writing in the corner. His mind went to the rabbits in the courtyard of Cloud Recesses, and how his foster father looked at them with something Sizhui could not name.

“Perhaps his family would not fail him.”

“I am his family.”

“Wangji.”

“That man has no right to call Lan Yuan family. Not after what he did.”

Sizhui looked to the side, just in time to see Jin Ling tear his eyes from his painting and look towards Sizhui. They were hiding something. Jiang Cheng, Zewu-Jun, Hanguang-Jun. They were all hiding something important.

“I need to know,” Sizhui said, and Jin Ling nodded in agreement.

My dear friends,

Please hurry.

Drown Out the Voices

Chapter Summary

When Jingyi got in the water, Sizhui found he really had improved. Jingyi struggled to keep his head above the water, and when it came to floating on their backs, Jingyi lasted a few breaths and Sizhui watched in shock. He couldn't swim as far as Jin Ling, but he got far enough out while Jingyi realized, quite quickly, leaving the area where his feet touched the ground was not a very good idea. It wasn't brave when it was just dumb.

"Did I look like that when I first got in the water?" Sizhui asked.

Jin Ling laughed out loud, uncaring for the feelings it might hurt. Zhou Yun, who had come, it seemed, just to watch the spectacle, kept it to a smile. She said, "On the bright side, you weren't any worse."

"I can *hear you!*" Jingyi splashed a hand down into the water.

Zizhen was flying off of the carriage before it had fully come to a stop. Sizhui laughed, and before he could say much, a bundle of flowing red robes came out, wrapping tight around his neck and ankles out as Zizhen spun into a free-flowing hug.

"Oh, *sure*," Jingyi protested, shuffling his way out of the carriage. "Just leave me by the wayside! Not like we haven't been traveling for three days, just the two of us. Just leave me behind!"

"I have been with you for three days, but we're here for Sizhui!" Zizhen insisted. He finally stepped back slightly, turning his smile to the side. Jin Ling was there, trying to look stoic with his arms crossed over his sword. "And for Jin Rulan! It's so good to see you too!"

For what it was worth, Sect Leader Jiang was trying to hide his surprise. *You should have told me you had friends*, the man had said to his golden nephew, or close enough. The more Jin Ling had come to accept their status as cousins, the more it had become clear that he was lonely. At least, he was lonely for the company of a peer and for the unconditional love of family that Sizhui could offer once they were closer *as close as they should have been*, according to his younger cousin's impassioned speech. Maybe now it was hitting close to home for Jiang Cheng as well.

“Welcome to Lotus Peer,” Jiang Cheng said, ever presenting his reputation of a clipped, respectably so, sect leader, unmoving and sturdy.

“Thank you so much for allowing our visit,” Jingyi said. Zizhen had turned his back, rummaging in the back of the carriage. “Lan Sizhui has said nothing but good things about his time here in his letters.”

“I’ve noticed the frequent letters,” Jiang Cheng said. Sizhui felt his cheeks burn. Perhaps he should have combined a few of them. He wasn’t *so* dependent on his friends, was he? These were troubling times!

“We would like to show our thanks!” Zizhen returned from the now mess of a carriage, holding out a box for Jiang Cheng. “We are so thrilled to be on this journey with Sizhui and offer you our warmest gratitude.”

Jiang Cheng reached forward, and Zizhen bowed deeply as he handed over the box. Jiang Cheng opened the lid, snorted, and looked up at Zizhen. “You are... Ouyang Zizhen?”

“Yes, Sect Leader.”

“Let me guess. You are the one who instructed Lan Sizhui on a gift that he should give upon his arrival here?”

Zizhen held back a frown, but Sizhui could tell the masking of confusion on his friend’s face. “Yes, Sect Leader?”

“Don’t worry. I only say because *obviously* a Lan would not pick such a tea.”

Jingyi balked.

“It’s okay,” Sizhui promised. “It’s only that he doesn’t approve of the Lan diet or taste buds.”

“I don’t approve of your utter lack of ability to *stand* proper food,” Jiang Cheng said. He turned, pushing back a fury of purple robes and stalking inside. Sizhui laughed, a tiny and Lan-approved sound, and grabbed his friends’ hands.

“Come on. I’ll show you my quarters.”

It wasn’t nearly as fast as he wanted. Sure, he wasn’t planning on *running*, running was against the rules, but he thought they might power walk, get to his quarters as soon as possible so Zizhen could coo over the carving in his bed and Jingyi and Jin Ling could sass each other about something pointless. Power walking while Jingyi complained about the massive, winding, maze-like bridges over the water before getting to his quarters was a different, unexpected matter.

“I don’t think the water is that deep around the quarters,” Sizhui promised.

“You only need three knuckles of water to drown,” Jin Ling immediately scoffed. Jingyi skidded to a stop, making Sizhui’s arm yank at his shoulder to stop as well. Jin Ling tilted his chin, arms still fully crossed. “That’s why you’ll be joining Sizhui in swim lessons. *Today*. I’m in charge!”

Jingyi flustered and turned to Sizhui. He shook his head. “It’s not that bad. It’s only... more tiring... than you might think.”

“Lans.” Jin Ling scoffed again and pushed past them on the bridge. He did move more towards Sizhui’s side – perhaps because he knew after so many swimming lessons if he caused one to fall in, Sizhui was less likely to drown. That felt like progress. Was that progress?

“Come along,” Sizhui said. “We’re almost there.”

Once Sizhui opened the door and pushed aside the teal sheer curtain, as expected, Zizhen ran to the bed, flopping himself right on top of it to go searching for the carving.

“If you lay down and look to the right-“ Sizhui started, but Zizhen was quick to follow the order. He grinned.

“Sizhui, it’s so cute!” He said, and Sizhui nodded in agreement.

“There’s so many,” Jingyi was at the desk, looking over the aged talisman paper. He picked up the red ribbon. “And this is his, too?”

“I put it in Sizhui’s hair the other day.” Jin Ling said. “*Scandalous.*”

“Sizhui, you wore red?” Jingyi gaped.

“I’m sure he looked lovely,” Zizhen said. Perhaps he was biased, considering Ouyang’s wore red and blue. “These must be your grandparents! He couldn’t remember them, but he carved them anyway. Your father was sentimental!”

“Well, we knew that!”

“Jin Ling, they just started,” Sizhui said. He put a hand on his cousin’s shoulder, though Jin Ling blustered, uncrossing his arms to fist at his side, he didn’t say anything else. Perhaps it was a start.

“Do you think you could keep the carving?” Zizhen said. “Though I suppose you’d have to cut it out. Maybe if they could remove the single beam...”

“You want to destroy uncle’s *furniture*?”

“Should not a boy be allowed to keep the only known artwork of his grandparents?”

“We’re not going to destroy Lotus Pier while we’re here,” Sizhui insisted. “Though I appreciate the sentiment, Zizhen, Jin Ling has a point. I’m lucky enough to be here to get to know what’s left of my father in the first place.”

“How do you suppose that’s *luck*?” Jingyi asked, picking up one of the talismans. He snorted and nodded his head upwards towards Sizhui. “Seems like general common decency to me.”

“It *is*,” Jin Ling insisted and stomped one foot down. “And it wasn’t our uncle that kept him from it. It was Lan Wangji!”

“Hanguang Jun,” Jingyi insisted, taking a small step forward.

“Jingyi,” Sizhui said. “I’m afraid my letters were quite... I could not bring myself to mention.”

Zizhen sat up, putting his feet to the ground. His friends, their friends, listened in reverence.

“Some of the visions did not paint Hanguang Jun in a good light.” Sizhui looked down. “Obviously, I still deeply respect him for the unmatched cultivator that he is, and the great care he has given me as my adoptive father. But, it does appear...”

Sizhui didn’t have a talent for words. He pressed his lips thin and looked to the side. His cousin, it seemed, had more gift for gab. “It “appears” as in, we *saw*, your Hanguang Jun kidnap Sizhui as a baby by holding our uncle at sword point.”

“You lie!” Jingyi yelled.

“He doesn’t,” Sizhui said. “We both saw it. We just didn’t hear it.”

Jingyi paused then, working his jaw as he tried to balance the idea that Sizhui wouldn't lie and the outer outrageousness of what he had heard. Sizhui understood it, he didn't want to believe it either. Seeing it with his own two eyes had caused quite the distress.

"So, we find a way to hear it," Zizhen said. He stood up, swinging his arms forward like everything would be *easy*. "That's a simple enough goal. There are three talismans you know work?"

Sizhui nodded and went to the desk. He picked up the three and announced them each. "This is for the people, and this is for hearing what they say. And this is one that showed me a place of my youth. It was... strange, and we only used it once."

He took a small breath and shrugged. "It's no matter. I suppose I don't care so much about the where. I just like the people."

"So we focus on combining these two first," Zizhen said.

"After swimming," Jin Ling said. Sizhui stared. "What? I am in charge of swimming lessons, and I'm not going to mess it up. You saw Jingyi on the bridges. I'm not having him *die* under my watch."

"I'm not going to die--"

"Do you want to bet?"

Jingyi frowned deeply. "Gambling--"

"Oh, *that's* where you draw the line." Jin Ling said.

“I just ate,” Jingyi snipped. “We had plums in the carriage, and one doesn’t swim after eating.”

Jin Ling clearly wanted to call *lies* but while Jingyi was often sassy and didn’t have the decorum of many Lans, he was still a Lan and a main family member at that. “Can’t we see a talisman in the work? Even once?”

Sizhui nodded. “I would be happy to.”

“Can we see one?” Zizhen asked. “Oh, please. I would love to see what handsome man gave us our beloved Sizhui.”

“Zizhen,” Sizhui said because *do not flatter*.

“Oh, come on. Do you have his nose? Do you have Hanguang-Jun’s nose?”

He was teasing. “Zizhen!”

“Oh, come on,” Zizhen wrapped him up in another hug. “I still want to see.”

“Let my arms free, and I can do so.”

Zizhen mumbled but let him go, taking just a tiny step back. Sizhui picked up the talisman, looking around his friends, nodding at each to see if they were ready. They nodded in return, and Sizhui took a small, steadying breath. *Here goes nothing*.

The familiar darkness returned, the soft curtains and drapes disappearing, leaving only them in the shadows, surrounded by the echoes of themselves. Jingyi shivered beside him. “This is creepy.”

“It’s alright. We’re still in my quarters.” Sizhui said. He took a small step forward in the memory, walking among the nothingness until a small, tiny toddler version of himself swirled into view.

“Is that you? You’re so tiny!” Zizhen said.

“What are you wearing? I thought you were Jiang.” Jingyi said. As Sizhui and Jin Ling had expected, he was dressed in the gray, undyed fabric that was too big on him, looking like an under-stuffed dumpling in cloth that looked like it itched far too much. It didn’t seem to bother the Baby Sizhui. He was probably used to it.

His father swirled into view, crouching on one knee in front of Baby Sizhui. He was dressed in matching fabric, the forearms barely dyed red, or perhaps once they had been. His expressions were animated as he talked to Baby Sizhui, ending with a delightfully pulled frown as he said something.

Lan Wangji stepped in. He looked positively regal compared to Sizhui and his father, unmarked and well-fed. That’s what was beginning to strike Sizhui. He knelt in the memory, sitting next to his younger self. He could see even freckles, barely there, on his father’s ear, but what hit him hard-

“Cousin,” Jin Ling said quietly. Sizhui had never done this before, never inserted himself like that into the memory to get a closer look. But this was his head, right? He wasn’t interrupting. It was only that-

It was only that....

It was only that his cheekbones seemed too prominent. His belt was tied so tight. Lan Wangji said something, pulling his father’s attention away from the baby Sizhui sat next to him, and his father turned, looking over his shoulder.

“Wait,” Sizhui said. He stood, turning to try and keep his father and adoptive father in his view. His father seemed somewhat wide-eyed, muttering a single word. Sizhui could guess what it was. *What?* Or perhaps... *huh*, but what seemed far more likely. Lan Wangji spoke

again, and his father scoffed, turning his head to the side and away. It didn't seem like a regular scoff, like it was in disbelief.

Whatever Hanguang Jun said, his father clearly believed it, he was just sad about it, or reluctant to accept. His father was clearly not a prideful man, whatever it was, it was making him sad.

The memory faded, and they were right back where they started. It was like Sizhui had never taken a step at all, still stood in front of the desk. He shuddered out a breath. "I didn't get in your way, did I?"

"Not at all," Zizhen rushed to speak, cutting Jingyi off before he could dare. "Your father is very handsome. I'm sure you inherited his good looks."

They learned nothing. He had seen before that at the very least Lan Wangji and his father had known each other, and from how the man spoke, so little, before about his parents, he held them in high regard. This was just... different. Seeing his father touched something in him, even if he didn't know what it was or if it didn't teach them anything.

"We should go," Jin Ling said. "For a swim lesson."

"What, *now*?" Jingyi said.

"Why not? I'm in charge of them, and I saw you on our bridges. I'm not having you drown while in my care."

"We're not *in your care*," Jingyi retorted.

"You are because I'm in charge--"

“I think it’s a great idea!” Zizhen said. “I think while you three go swimming, I can work on combining these two talismans. We can work on adding the third later. As much as I would love to see Little Sizhui’s home, I agree seeing them speak would be more necessary.”

“Now, hold on. Why doesn’t the Young Mistress have to judge your swimming, too?” Jingyi said.

“Because we’ve hunted water demons together before, and he knows I can keep up with him.”

“What? When?” Jin Ling said.

“Last spring!”

“We were on that hunt, too,” Jingyi said.

“None of you Lans jumped off the boat to wrestle with it,” Jin Ling retorted, picking his chin up high. “I did.”

“And I did, too,” Zizhen said. “We swam neck and neck to the beast.”

“Then why don’t I remember you being there?” Jin Ling said. Zizhen just raised his eyebrow, dropping his head slightly to the side. “What?”

“You were too busy trying to see if *someone* was watching you.”

“What! No! I was not.”

“Were too.”

“Was not!”

“Were too.”

“My friends,” Sizhui said. “I think Zizhen has a very reasonable.”

Zizhen grinned, knowing it was the closest to flattery that he could get from a Lan. Jin Ling frowned, but he couldn’t much argue with that in the end. They both wanted to get a working talisman, sooner rather than later.

It was odd, though. Sizhui hadn’t thought his swimming would have actually improved. He was still so tired after each lesson, and his arms felt like they might fall off. He hated how the seawater made his hair feel, and Jin Ling could swim actual circles around him while Sizhui splashed around, barely getting anywhere and feeling like a wet dog.

There are no dogs in Lotus Pier!

Not even Fairy?

Of course, not even Fairy. I said no dogs. Look, now you made me say the word!

But when Jingyi got in the water, Sizhui found he really had improved. Jingyi struggled to keep his head above the water, and when it came to floating on their backs, Jingyi lasted a few breaths, and Sizhui watched in shock. He couldn’t swim as far as Jin Ling, but he got far enough out while Jingyi realized, quite quickly, leaving the area where his feet touched the ground was not a very good idea. It wasn’t brave when it was just dumb.

“Did I look like that when I first got in the water?” Sizhui asked.

Jin Ling laughed out loud, uncaring for the feelings it might hurt. Zhou Yun, who had come, it seemed, just to watch the spectacle, kept it to a smile. She said, “On the bright side, you weren’t any worse.”

“I can **hear you!**” Jingyi splashed a hand down into the water.

Exploring Lotus Pier with his friends – all of his friends now – was a very different experience, too. Every other morning, he and Jingyi were dragged off to the water for lessons, and Zizhen spent those hours trying to combine two talismans that were above all of their heads.

“Your father truly was a mad genius,” Zizhen said. “But this isn’t about genius. I don’t need to solve anything. It’s a puzzle piece, my friend, and I can work a puzzle!”

The rest of the time they spent causing all the havoc two teens and two Lan teens could come up with. Zizhen seemed determined to try and get to the soup his father loved so much and handle all the spiciness that his father had taken it with. Jiang Cheng refused to teach them how to make it. He claimed he wasn’t even sure he was making it entirely right, and he ‘refused’ to let the wrong version of his sister’s soup out into the world. They explored the storage room, trying to sort all the paintings they expected his father had done.

They explored the older sections of Lotus Pier, the places that had avoided the fire. Zizhen checked every beam, loudly announcing if there was a height chart or not, despite the fact that he had yet to find one. Jingyi searched each corner for forgotten toys that may have been tossed to the wayside, only finding one dusty rattle drum. The feathers on the side seemed to have been almost Lan blue, but that was probably the age and dust tricking their eyes.

Once he found a fan, but Jiang Cheng quickly snatched it away, eyeing the electric purple designs. “That was my parents’ quarters.”

They never went in there again. No one wanted to face the ghost of Yu Ziyuan. They weren’t nuts. The rest of the time, the four of them tried to piece the working talisman together, going over variations that they hadn’t tried yet to piece together the two talismans to make a whole new one.

Zizhen was undaunted. There were only so many versions, he claimed. They'd get there eventually.

Finally, one day it came true. They came back from swim lessons, damp and overworked, while Jin Ling chattered on about their *form* and their *wasted energy*, but Zizhen just stood on the bridge, waiting for them, bouncing on his heels full of pride. Sizhui stopped short.

"You did it?"

"Mm-hmm," Zizhen said. "I just saw and heard for myself my baby sister's first birthday when she ate an entire dumpling by herself and threw it back up on our mother."

"I'm not sure that's a memory I would have liked to see," Jingyi said. It didn't matter to the rest of them, though. Zizhen laughed and pulled them all into the quarters.

They had gone through so much talisman paper in their time at Lotus Pier. Sizhui was surprised no one had asked by now what exactly they were trying to do. Not that it was exactly suspicious for four young cultivators to work on their talismans, aside from the fact that talismans were less respected than practicing their swordsmanship. Sizhui picked up the talisman. He could see which was for sound by now, he knew it very well and which parts were for sight. His father's handiwork pieced together.

"Told you," Zizhen said. "This part is just a puzzle. Go on. Give it a go."

Sizhui took a deep breath and raised his hand. It was nerve-racking, but more than that, it was so exciting and so hopeful. Jin Ling reached out, putting a hand on his shoulder. Sizhui smiled back at him. Would they see his mother? The darkness returned.

There he was, in the same ratty robes, but he was in someone's lap. A woman's, and she was dressed in all red, with gold dripping down from her hair, embroidered into her clothes. Why was she dressed for a wedding when holding a dirty child?

“Yan-na.” He said. Sizhui smiled. He was hoping one day he’d be able to show this to Jin Ling. He hadn’t realized he’d been thinking about this exact memory when he drew the talisman in the air.

“Yanli. I’m your auntie Yanli. But you’re so close!” She said. She tightened her arms around him, encouraging the proper pronunciation from what had to be a toddler.

“Yan-na.” He said again.

“Yanli! Oh, you’re just too cute, aren’t you?” She hugged him tightly, pressing her cheek to his forehead.

His father stepped into view, smiling at the two of them. His eyes seemed so full and bright, like this was truly the best thing he had ever seen. His smile seemed so wide. “Ah, don’t be too sweet to him. He’ll get spoiled!”

Jiang Yanli smiled back, “I can’t believe you became a parent before me. I’m older.”

“But look at you...” His father said. He reached out but his hand felt short. Ashamed, Sizhui realized. He was ashamed to reach for his sister, as if his touch would make her filthy, too.

“I just needed you to see my wedding....” Jiang Yanli said. Her wedding dress, she meant. As if he wouldn’t be there to see the wedding itself. If she meant the wedding itself, someone would have helped them get better clothes. Jiang Cheng would have pulled up his father’s hair so that the lopsided pull wouldn’t be there.

His father hadn’t been there to see his sister get married.

The memory faded, and that was all it took for Jin Ling to push himself to the side, sputtering and eyes wet.

“Let’s give him a moment,” Sizhui said. His cousin was prideful, after all, and the makings of a sect leader were building in a teenage body that wasn’t keeping up just yet. Sizhui ushered the other two out, going to the bridge. It was obvious that they weren’t going to stop there, no. But if anyone deserved a cry, it was Jin Ling.

He didn’t take long. They sat on the bridge, feet dangling into the water as they waited. It hadn’t been the most remarkable memory for anyone but Jin Ling, so Sizhui and Jingyi took the time to congratulate Zizhen for pulling it off.

“You guys,” Zizhen said, waving it off politely. “I will say, your father –“

“Was a genius,” Sizhui said. Were he anyone else, anyone besides a Lan, he’d be brimming with pride. “It seems he really was.”

“And an artist, too,” Zizhen said, leaning back on his forearms. “What couldn’t he do?”

Stay alive, apparently, but they weren’t going to go there. Jin Ling opened the door again, inviting them back into the quarters. He was still, quiet, too stone-faced to thank them for giving him the time. They had other things to do.

“Did you pick that memory?” Jin Ling asked.

Sizhui thought for a moment. “I don’t know. I was wondering if we might see her. Perhaps that might have done it?”

“Can you think of the other memory?” Jin Ling asked. “You know the one that Jingyi thinks we’re making up.”

That was a terrifying thought. Half of him was desperate to know what was said. Half of him was *terrified*. Hanguang Jun was a pillar of the community. What would it be like if that was dashed? If his father figure wasn’t the person that he thought he was, what would happen?

What would his friends think? What would everyone think if it got out? As far as he was aware, Hanguang Jun wasn't someone who deserved to have his reputation dashed.

It was Jingyi this time who put his hand on Sizhui's shoulder. "More information can't hurt, Sizhui. And if anyone deserves to know, it's you."

"I suppose there's no harm in trying," Sizhui said. He raised his hand. Last time, he had just been thinking about Jiang Yanli. If he did get more specific, he had to think of himself in Jiang Cheng's arms.

He heard the sound of disciples practicing, and he opened his eyes mostly to darkness. But there it was. The Jiang Disciples practicing in the far background, and Jiang Cheng stood there in a sect leader's glory, the lotus in his hair, and little Sizhui in his arms.

"That's where the disciples practice," Jiang Cheng was saying. "Soon, there will be more. There used to be so many, but we'll get there again. What do you think?"

And a sword unsheathed. Hanguang Jun was there in his mourning whites, his stance and face fearsome enough to send soldiers running. Jingyi gasped. "You weren't kidding."

"Of course not." Jin Ling said, hands clasped behind his back.

"What the hell do you think you're doing," Jiang Cheng sneered. He took that half step back, hiding Sizhui in his arms. Zidian on his hand sparkled.

Hanguang Jun glared. "Give him to me."

Jiang Cheng laughed bitterly. "Why would I do that?"

Hanguang Jun raised his sword to Jiang Cheng's stomach. Zizhen and Jingyi were gasping, grabbing at each other in shock. Zidian snapped out, the long electric whip threatening. Even

the disciples in the background were stilling in surprise.

“What’s going on?” Zizhen whispered, but Jingyi quickly shushed him.

“Have you lost your mind?” Jiang Cheng asked. “You come to Lotus Pier, demand my nephew from me, pull your sword on me?”

“I haven’t.” Hanguang Jun said. Now, finally, Sizhui perked up. He’d figure before that Hanguang Jun said *give him to me*, but this? This was what had kept him awake. “I only know the man who murdered him doesn't have the **right** to his son.”

Play Our Own Song

Chapter Summary

“We should have done this before,” Sizhui said. Why did his throat feel like it was swelling? Like he was sick and couldn’t get his own tongue back in its proper place? “We shouldn’t have danced around it. We should have just asked and gotten it over with.”

“There’s not much tact in asking someone if they’re a killer,” Zizhen said. “It’s not exactly polite to make such demands when we are guests in his home.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Speak, speak, speak!”

“Alright, alright,” His father took a small stuffed dragon toy, and held it up, pointed down to make faces. Baby Sizhui hugged his leg, sat on his father’s foot, a little smile on his face. “Here. Go play with this.”

Baby Sizhui took the toy, but he didn’t move. He just kept staring up at his father, with big doe eyes of awe.

“A-Yuan. If you follow me this way, I will plant you in the field as a turnip.”

A-Yuan grinned and ran off, but not too far. He sat down instead, legs straight out in the darkness. Another voice laughed, swirling into a farmer dressed in the same rags as the others. His father came over, smiling as he knelt down next to A-Yuan.

“A-Yuan. You really want to be a turnip?” His father asked. “Fine. Then stay still. If you move, then I won’t plant you.”

His father reached down, though they could not see any of the dirt he was digging up, and throwing gently into A-Yuan's lap. The toddler seemed to try and help, tiny hands patting down the dirt this way and that.

"There you go!" His father said, exaggerating his voice like this was such tiring work. "I will plant a big turnip today...."

The quartet wasn't sure what to do. They weren't sure how to feel.

The previous generation was one of war, they knew that much. It was no secret that one of the reasons the major sect leaders seemed to be so young was that their parents had been cut down in this great, secretive war that none of them wished to speak of. That wasn't bad, Sizhui reasoned. If he had been in a war, who could say if he would have the willpower to speak of it? It was no secret that war was a horror show.

His adoptive father's reaction, however, seemed to speak volumes. His usually quiet, sparing voice had ricocheted out, and the anger was real and violent. It didn't seem like the kind of anger that would vibrate into being from a mishap during a battle. It wasn't an accident.

Lan Sizhui wanted it to be one, but as the memories sunk in deeper and deeper, the truth was unavoidable. Hanguang-Jun wasn't a man who jumped to conclusions. He didn't guess or assume. He hadn't raised the Lan Juniors to do so, either. What he believed, that Jiang Cheng had killed Sizhui's father, he believed with good (or horrifying) reason.

"The four of you have been together for only a few weeks and have traumatized all the disciples," Jiang Cheng said over dinner. "Now you are traumatizingly quiet. What happened?"

Jingyi looked up, eyes wide in distress as fish hung from his mouth. What were they meant to say? *Yes, Uncle, we apologize for worrying you. We're just wondering if we're dining with a guiltless murderer.* Lans didn't lie. But Sizhui didn't want to say that. No... no, that wasn't the case. He did want to say it, but he couldn't.

“It is only a debate that got out of hand,” Zizhen said, piping up with a small shift. Sizhui held himself back: he had a deep urge to shut his eyes and sigh in relief. “Sect Leader Jiang, we apologize if our temper has had you worried. It’s only that Jingyi and Jin Ling believe one thing and *obviously* me and Sizhui think they’re quite silly.”

They should all be thankful for Zizhen. Zizhen was allowed to lie, and apparently wasn’t even that bad at it, not as far as Sizhui could tell.

“Jingyi and I are not on the same side,” Jin Ling protested, because he was allowed to lie, too.

“Perhaps if you allowed him to be, he would,” Zizhen tucked his chin up a little bit. “And he’d be close with you too.”

“Don’t make it weird!”

“Young men,” Jiang Cheng raised a hand. “Just calm down. What was this fight even over?”

Whether or not to ask you if you were a cold-blooded killer. Why did you kill your own brother? Why keep his things if you’re the reason he’s gone?

Why keep his quarters if it was all your fault?

Why? Was it all your fault?

But Zizhen had a better idea. “Can a conscious fierce corpse defeat a normal one? See, Sizhui and I think the benefit of logic, planning and reasoning would mean that yes, but Jingyi had stated that perhaps all that thought might slow them down during such a fight.”

“Ridiculous,” Jiang Cheng scoffed. “If a cultivator can defeat a single fierce corpse without the strength of one, then so too could a conscious fierce corpse.”

“But would not a fierce corpse who had its mind returned feel worse about fighting one just like him?” Zizhen asked.

“Perhaps,” Sizhui said. Zizhen, who seemed like he’d been wanting to continue, stopped, mouth just hanging open. “It’s best not to start this now.”

Jiang Cheng hummed. “Too true. It’s not worth all the fuss, if that’s what’s been on your minds lately. There are no fierce corpses around here any way for you to worry about.”

Jingyi huffs, and Sizhui can guess exactly what is going through his head. *It’s not the fierce corpses we’re worried about, it’s the ghosts and who killed them!*

Sometimes, Sizhui hates that he knows his friends so well.

“I’m still hungry,” A-Yuan said.

His father looked down, his own bowl in his hands. “Ah?”

“Is there more?” A-Yuan asked. He held up his bowl in tiny little hands, and quickly, his father knelt down.

“Don’t,” Sizhui pleaded. Jingyi put a hand on his shoulder, whispering his name behind him, but Sizhui could feel tears building up. “Please.”

“Take mine,” His father traded their bowls, giving himself the empty one. “Now be a good boy and eat all that good stuff.”

“Are you sure?” A-Yuan asked.

“Remember what I told you?” His father asked with a smile. “I have the stomach of a father! If you’re full, then so am I!”

“No, that’s not how it works!” Sizhui said. “Please. You’re already – you’re so –“

“Sizhui, my friend,” Zizhen said quietly.

“Look at him!” Sizhui insisted. “He’d blow away in a strong wind!”

A-Yuan took a bite, some pale kind of vegetable. A radish, or perhaps a turnip.

“Mm!” His father said, scrunching a smile on his face. “I can feel it going down my throat now.”

A-Yuan giggled, absolutely delighted.

Sizhui cried as the memory faded. He knew he couldn’t change anything. He couldn’t go back in time and save this man.

He just wanted to, so badly. Enough time had gone that he knew he was entirely unfilial to the woman many might call his adoptive grandmother. There were too many small comments, too many details Jin Ling had been easy to call out, but his father? His father starved so Sizhui could live.

He seemed like a man too kind. A petal among lighting sharp thorns. He didn’t know why they were starving. Why were they starving to such a degree? Why – “he’s so thin.”

“I know.” Jin Ling said.

“No,” Sizhui turned to his cousin. He could feel wet track marks on his cheeks. It shouldn’t be so heart breaking. But A-Yuan, his younger self, seemed so happy. The discordance was sharp in his chest. “Were he and Uncle fighting? You said yourself, we should not have been in rags. The Jiangs would not let a family member run around like that. Why was no one helping him?”

“Perhaps they were fighting?” Zizhen asked. “If what Hanguang-Jun said was true, there must have been anger between them.”

Maybe so.

“So, Sect Leader Jiang had a brother that no one speaks of,” Jingyi held up a finger like he was counting. “A brother he cared for so much that he kept his childhood quarters untouched like a shrine for, what, sixteen years? But before that, he got in a huge fight and left that brother to **starve to death** only to murder him?”

“Perhaps that’s why he’s kept these quarters?” Zizhen asked. “Perhaps it is out of guilt.”

“If it was out of guilt, would he really be able to look Sizhui in the eye?” Jingyi rolled his eyes to Zizhen.

“Why not?” Zizhen asked. “It is not Sizhui that he killed.”

“It makes no sense!” Jingyi said.

“Of course, it doesn’t make sense!” Jin Ling nearly yelled. The rest of the quartet turned to him in shock – not because Jin Ling was yelling, no, that much was par for the course. But the tenor of his voice was calling. “None of it makes sense. My uncle isn’t a murderer! He wouldn’t murder his brother!”

“You didn’t even know he had a brother.”

“Shut up, Jingyi! That’s not the point!”

“What is the point, Young Mistress?”

Jin Ling growled out. He had no answer. None of them had any answers.

“When will Rich Man come back?”

His father had A-Yuan on his hips. They were walking – from the way his father’s legs moved, the terrain was uneven and complicated. “A-Yuan, you cannot just call him that because he bought you toys.”

*“But he is rich. He bought **two** wooden swords!”*

His father smiled a bit, and reached one hand up to wipe hair out of A-Yuan’s face. “Lan Zhan is a very good person. But I can only hope he does not come back.”

A-Yuan leaned back in his father’s arms, giving his father a considerate and curious stare. His father sighed and smiled, before scrunching up his face and rubbing their noses together. “A-Yuan. You’re such a good boy, do you know that?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Hah. Do you know how I know you’re not just a good boy, but a very, very good boy?”

Sizhui laughed, the sound bitter and relieved to hear something he never thought he would.

“How?”

“Because of Lan Zhan,” His father said, reaching one hand out, like he was gripping something to ease his way as he stepped down uneven surfaces. “See, he’s a very good person. You remember that pretty ribbon you liked so much?”

“Uh-huh.”

“The reason you don’t get a pretty ribbon like that is because it’s a mark of his sect. And his sect is very, very boring, and very, very prestigious. And they have many, many rules that they have to follow all the time, and that’s what lets him wear that ribbon.”

“How many?”

“Thousands of rules!”

“That’s a lot,” A-Yuan said. “How many?”

“Three thousand.”

“Three thousand! Can you count that high?”

“I could, but it’s so long I wouldn’t ever want to.” His father explained. “That is not the point, however. All those rules, they govern every little thing that Lan Zhan does. They’ve helped him become the wonderful person that he is. The kind of person who buys toys for a little boy he just met. Those rules help him know what is right from wrong. But you, A-Yuan.”

His father did it again, scrunching his face and rubbing his nose into A-Yuan’s cheek. “You know right from wrong without all those rules. You know because you feel it, here, in your heart. That’s what makes you such a good boy.”

His father touched him on the chest, just over his heart.

“You don’t have rules.”

“I have rules. I just don’t have three thousand of them.”

“What rules?”

“That little turnips should eat all their vegetables,” His father teased, tickling his fingers to A-Yuan’s stomach as he held him, making the toddler in his arms giggle. “And don’t be mean, especially to me.”

“Am not mean!” A-Yuan shrieked in laughter. “Why does that mean you don’t want Rich Man to come back and play with me?”

“Because it makes him sad,” His father said, taking a big, high kneed step like there was something unmovable he needed to climb over. “That’s part of don’t be mean – if you make people needlessly sad, that’s quite mean, don’t you think?”

“Why’s it make him sad?”

“Because.” His father stopped, like he had to think. Perhaps it was too rough to think about, or too complicated for a toddler to understand. “Because you and Granny and your uncles and auntie, they’re in a situation his rules didn’t expect. They don’t tell him what is right or wrong when it comes to you. And ... and I make him sad.”

“That’s against your rules.”

"I know," His father said, the sadness in his own voice hard to bear. "I wish I could stop. It's just not an option."

"Well, that didn't answer any questions!" Jin Ling threw his hands up in the air. "That just made more of them!"

"On the bright side, we know that had to take place after he buried Sizhui like a turnip," Zizhen pointed out. "That's good to know."

"How is it good to know?" Jingyi asked. "I mean, actually. Are we looking for a timeline here?"

"A timeline might be nice?" Zizhen said.

"Making a timeline must be secondary," Sizhui shook his head. "What could that possibly mean? That the situation was something the Lan rules didn't prepare Hanguang-Jun for?"

"Hanguang-Jun is prepared for everything." Jingyi nodded in agreement. "Though that is a bit comforting."

"What is?" Jin Ling asked.

"That even then, Sizhui wanted to be Lan! Didn't you hear? *The pretty ribbon you want.*" Jingyi pointed to his own forehead. "It's one thing to think Hanguang-Jun kidnapped Sizhui from a murderer—"

"Uncle is *not* a murderer—" Jin Ling insisted.

"It's another to think he was taking a four-year-old and forcing four thousand rules on him." Jingyi steam rolled on.

“Sizhui’s father said there were three,” Zizhen pointed out. There was a moment of quiet, of thought. “So in between that conversation and Hanguang-Jun adopting him, the Lans added a thousand more rules.”

“More than that,” Sizhui said. “There’s over four thousand.”

“Maybe Sizhui’s father just didn’t know how many rules there truly were?” Jin Ling suggested.

“No way,” Jingyi frowned, sticking his bottom lip firmly out. “He uses Hanguang-Jun’s *birth* name, I doubt someone that close to Hanguang-Jun didn’t know precisely how many rules there were.”

“Maybe he’s a jerk?” Jin Ling said. “He never said he had permission to use Hanguang-Jun’s birth name.”

“Absolutely not, that man is not a jerk,” Zizhen said. “We’re actively watching that man starve himself for Sizhui’s sake, he’s not a jerk.”

“He’s a father. Just because Grandmother Yu wouldn’t do that for her children doesn’t mean it’s absolutely remarkable that his father would do it for him!”

“No!” It might be the romantic in him that had Zizhen yelling. “Besides, I do not think Hanguang-Jun would commit abduction for a jerk, much less buy that jerk’s child toys!”

“I’m only coming up with theories, stop yelling at me!” Jin Ling insisted

“We are getting nowhere like this.” Jingyi moaned.

Once again, he was greeted with the sight of his baby self, clinging and sobbing to Hanguang-Jun's leg. His mouth banana'd down, wailing. And his adoptive father looked so, so confused and lost, clutching his sword and one hand fisted behind his back. His eyes were so young.

"That little boy cries so badly," One of the trio of three men said. "Was he scolded by his dad?"

"How can the father-?"

"I'm not," Hanguang-Jun tried to defend.

"Wait, is Hanguang-Jun... nervous?" Jingyi said in shock. "I've never heard him so!"

A-Yuan was rocking, big fat tears rolling down his face.

"You see? You must be his dad!" One of the townsmen said. "Your noses look exactly the same."

Sizhui rubbed his nose. He wasn't sure he thought so, but the idea was nice.

"Don't you agree? Everyone?"

"That's right! That's right! This man is so cold!"

"Look how this child is crying!" Another said. He seemed truly offended that Hanguang-Jun was doing nothing to support A-Yuan.

“He doesn’t even know how to hug and comfort the child...” Another tutted in disapproval. “He just left him crying. How can you be a father?”

“I’m-” Hanguang-Jun tried again.

“So young,” The eldest said. “It must be your first time being a father. Right? I also didn’t know anything back then. But I know everything now after my wife gave a few more births.”

Many began to crowd at A-Yuan’s side, crouching and offering small comforts as they could. “Where is his mother? You’re not even doing anything!”

Sizhui saw it coming. He turned, just in time to see his father step forward, a bright little smile on his face, the freckle under his lip on display. *And Lan Wangji, in return, seemed so, so relieved.*

“Lan Zhan!” And everything slowed. There was a moment, just the two of them staring at each other. His father broke it first, brushing everyone to go, leave them alone. “Lan Zhan. What a coincidence. Why did you come to Yiling?”

“Yiling? What’s in Yiling?” Zizhen whispered. Jingyi punched him in the arm.

“Night hunt. Passing by. ” Lan Wangji said. He took in a deep breath, like it was the first he’d had in a minute. “This child...”

“Ah!” His father reached down, pulling A-Yuan off of Lan Wangji’s leg. A-Yuan stood, quickly taking his father’s hand. “This child is my son.”

For some reason, Lan Wangji looked completely scandalized by the idea. His father seemed mollified by that, and looked down. “Why is he crying? What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Ah,” His father said, like that made total sense. “I’ve got it. Oh, Lan Zhan, pretty as you are, you always look like you bear a lot of hatred. A-Yuan is still so very young. He can’t tell beauty and ugliness apart. So once he’s stared at by some unamiable man like you, of course he will cry.”

“Oh. Oh, *no*,” Zizhen said, like he’d understood something the rest of them couldn’t. Jingyi punched him again. “Ow! What was that for?”

“Why are you oh no-ing? What’s there to oh no?” Jingyi demanded.

“I don’t want to say,” Zizhen said. “If I say it and I’m wrong, that will make it all very much worse!”

“We’re all trying to work through this together,” Jin Ling said. “You can’t keep secrets.”

“I refuse.”

“Zizhen, please?” Sizhui asked.

“Please, my friend,” Zizhen asked. “At least let me see more to get the feel if I’m right or not.”

Fair enough.

It was a memory that they had seen before. With Zizhen and Jingyi, the day they arrived, Sizhui had found this memory. His father was crouched on one knee before A-Yuan, a flute in his hand as his elbow rested on the knee.

Hanguang-Jun was just behind, watching with one hand behind his back, the other at his stomach. His sword, Bichen, was tucked into his belt.

“I know, it’s a very pretty ribbon,” His father said, amusement in his voice. “But only Lans get them.”

“Can I-?”

“No, no, you can’t be a Lan, you’re a A-Yuan.” His father said teasing. But A-Yuan was only small, and it seemed he’d had a long day. “You don’t want to be a Lan for the pretty ribbon.”

A-Yuan was pouting, the bottom lip was wobbling. All hell would break loose soon.

“Now, see, if you become a Lan you have to follow all sorts of rules!” His father tried to explain. He reached out, cupping A-Yuan’s cheek in his hand, rubbing a thumb in circles over his face. “You’ll never laugh so hard your shoulders shake. You won’t grin so wide you feel like your face will split in two. You’ll never hug someone so tight, you’ll fear your muscles might tear.”

Sizhui felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. Zizhen had said it better. **Oh, no.**

“You’ll never shake your fists with anger. You’ll never sob in depression. Or run with joy.” His father said. His father pouted, mimicking the great sad face on A-Yuan’s, but half mocking, half in jest and tease. “What a shame it would be, to be a Lan!”

Sizhui felt a crack in his heart. Brutal, striking, like it would not beat again.

“Not true.”

His father turned, looking over his shoulder at Hanguang-Jun. “Lan Zhan. Don’t think I don’t remember the Lan rules. Did I not recite them at indoctrination?”

“Mm.” Hanguang-Jun said, and yet, “Not true.”

“I distinctly remember no running-“

“You have already taught him how to run.” Hanguang-Jun said. “My job would only be to be sure he does not forget.”

“Lan Zhan,” His father stood, hands on his hips. “You would allow A-Yuan to run? You would allow running in Cloud Recesses?”

“It’s important to you,” Hanguang-Jun said like they were the easiest words in the world. “For you, I would allow it.”

His father turned away, shutting his eyes. Sad. “You can’t say such things. I can’t take it.”

“If-“

“No, Lan Zhan,” His father said.

“Come with me to Cloud Recesses,” Hanguang-Jun tried again.

“What about his grandmother?” His father asked. “And everyone else?”

Sizhui turned away. His father – his father? What a shame it would be to be a Lan.

And he had a grandmother. He had a grandmother, had she died before his father? Would she have been able to take him in after his death? What about the others? The auntie and uncles

his father had brought up? Where were all they?

Why had they not taken him in, if he wasn't meant to be a Lan?

Sizhui turned, going for the door.

"What are you doing?" Jin Ling asked.

"I'm asking him."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Jingyi rushed forward, cutting in front of him until he was walking backwards on the bridge, facing him as Sizhui pushed forward, Zizhen and Jin Ling just behind. "You plan to just go up to Sect Leader Jiang? The Sect Leader that commands lightning, famous for his short temper and ask him if he killed your father?"

"Say what you mean," Sizhui recited. He was still a Lan for now. It had to be good for something. "Do not cause confusion."

"There's a difference between causing confusion and asking to be whipped!"

"Uncle wouldn't whip him," Jin Ling protested. "He's been asking for Sizhui to come for over a decade."

"Just like he wouldn't kill his brother?" Jingyi protested.

"We should have done this before," Sizhui said. Why did his throat feel like it was swelling? Like he was sick and couldn't get his own tongue back in its proper place? "We shouldn't have danced around it. We should have just asked and gotten it over with."

“There’s not much tact in asking someone if they’re a killer,” Zizhen said. “It’s not exactly polite to make such demands when we are guests in his home.”

“Zizhen, what was all that?” Jingyi asked. “You never explained why you were getting upset.”

“Can we please focus on Sizhui?” Zizhen asked. “I have a feeling this is going to end terribly.”

“Oh, wow, you must be a genius,” Jin Ling snarked.

It did not take long to find the Sect Leader. He was where one would expect – sat in his Lotus throne, polishing his sword. He raised an eyebrow, perhaps a bit upset to see four teenagers approaching with a bluster in their robes, no matter how graceful Lans always seemed to walk.

Sizhui wondered how different his gate would be if his father had been the one to teach him.

“What’s this?”

“I need to ask you something,” Sizhui said.

“Spit it out.”

“Did you do it?” Sizhui stepped forward. Despite all the swim lessons, the great pains Jin Ling and Zhou Yun had taken to teach him, the hours he spent mastering how to float, Sizhui felt like he was drowning. Like water was climbing his throat, and he could only gasp. “Did you murder my father?”

Please forgive the delay!

Boys Becoming Men Under the Sky

Chapter Summary

“Please. I need to know.”

Jiang Cheng stood, his eyes glistening as though they may melt. His sword hand had fallen to the side as he stood, nothing threatening, nothing horrid. But the Sect Leader stood there, his posture forgotten like he'd never been a sect leader at all. Instead, his chest seemed collapsed, like his heart was sinking to the floor. “Who told you this?”

“Please. I need to know.”

Jiang Cheng stood, his eyes glistening as though they may melt. His sword hand had fallen to the side as he stood, nothing threatening, nothing horrid. But the Sect Leader stood there, his posture forgotten like he'd never been a sect leader at all. Instead, his chest seemed collapsed, like his heart was sinking to the floor. “Who told you this?”

“Sizhui,” Jingyi whispered, his voice as gentle as his voice ever got. Sizhui glanced back over his shoulder, keeping his own eyes soft. *I'm okay. I've got this.*

“It doesn't matter who told me. Did you do it?”

“No!” Jiang Cheng said. For a moment, he looked like a child, begging someone to believe him. His sword point was in the ground, arms pinned in tight to his side as his – his –

He looked so hurt.

“I didn't. I didn't,” He repeated over and over.

“Why is it thought that you did? Who killed him?”

Jiang Cheng's eyes sparked. He shook his head wildly. "No... every- no one – no – every- no, he--"

"Uncle," Sizhui said when he had a moment long enough that he wasn't entirely convinced it counted as 'interrupting.' "What happened to my father?"

"It is a story you are too young for!" Jiang Cheng insisted. "**We** were too young for it, and it happened to us."

He wasn't going to yell. He wasn't going to raise his voice, he was a Lan, he knew better, but... what a shame it would be, to be a Lan. "I have a right to know!"

Jiang Cheng worked his jaw. "Not yet, you do not."

Sizhui wasn't glaring. He wasn't. "I think it's best I take my leave."

Maybe he was, just a little.

"Sizhui!" Jingyi said, but this time, he didn't turn around to comfort his friend. Jiang Cheng straightened, trying to resume the posture of a feared and respected Sect Leader.

"I would like to take some of his things with me. His talismans, and the hair ribbon."

Sect Leader Jiang narrowed his eyes. "You cannot have the hair ribbon. It will remain here for your next visit."

"Uncle," Sizhui said.

“You are my brother’s son. The moment you set foot through the gates of Lotus Pier and accepted that status, you accepted the role as heir to the sect.” Sect Leader Jiang said. Sizhui pressed his lips to a thin line. Perhaps he should have seen that coming. It had never been top of mind, the fact that Sect Leader Jiang was well known for his temper and his bachelor’s status. “His ribbon will be waiting for you here, as well as things you have yet to see.”

“Fine,” Sizhui said.

He couldn’t take the ribbon with him, but the flurry of packing was none the easier. His things were neat and tidy, and they were easy to put away into his boxes. He was a Lan. He was clean. It was the talismans – these were things he hadn’t accounted for when he thought about how much space he should need for the trip. His hands trembled as he tried to find the best, cleanest ways to pack them, refusing to risk letting anyone get crinkled. A hand touched his shoulder.

“There’s room in mine,” Jingyi said. “I didn’t pack neatly. There’s plenty of room if I do now.”

“And in mine,” Zizhen said. “I had room for the gift I gave to Sect Leader Jiang.”

“Thank you,” Sizhui smiled and quickly rubbed his sleeves over his face, trying to get his cheeks dry. “I. I don’t know what to do?”

“We go home?” Jingyi suggested.

“Maybe. But I don’t want to stay there. I just want to ask Hanguang-Jun some questions and go. I can’t face him repeatedly now.”

“We’ll go to Gusu, then straight to Koi Tower,” Jin Ling said. The others looked up. Jin Ling was on the bed, holding blank paper to the bar of the bed frame, charcoal in the other. “What? We can stay there as long as you want.”

“What are you doing, Young Mistress?” Jingyi asked.

Jin Ling turned the paper around to show off. A large black and dusty patch featured in the center of the paper, but an etching remained. There was no charcoal on the paper where there was a dip of the carving in the bed frame. It was a perfect copy of the carving. He’d run the charcoal over the paper so lightly that it only reacted to the wood and not the dip of it. Sizhui smiled. “Thank you, cousin. It’s perfect.”

“Of course, it is,” Jin Ling said, putting the paper in the chest of his robes.

Dear Hanguang-Jun

I will be there soon.

There is no reason to set up my bed.

Returning to Gusu was strange. The cold of the mountain town hit different after spending so much time in Yunmeng. He hadn’t realized how different they were in terms of climate, and he certainly never thought he would have acclimated like he was meant for a warmer temperature.

Returning to the cold hard stare of his adoptive father was no less complicated than he thought it would be. They sat in silence, a table in between them with tea starting to get cold. Naturally, Hanguang-Jun refused to break the silence. Naturally, it took some time for Sizhui to figure out what to say.

The entire carriage ride here, he had tried to think of something. Anything. Some respectful way to say, *Father. What the fuck.*

There was no tact. Perhaps it was just like asking Sect Leader Jiang if he was a murderer.

“Hanguang-Jun,” He tried again. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Just barely, Hanguang-Jun quirked an eyebrow.

“Why didn’t you tell me that was my father’s home?”

“Adoptive.”

“What?”

“He adopted you when you were an infant.”

“I was adopted *twice*?” Sizhui protested. Hanguang-Jun hummed in agreement. “Why-what?”

Too many questions. He had too many questions. “What happened to my birth parents?”

“Your father died in the war before you were born. As far as I know, your mother died at birth.”

“So, my father-?”

Hanguang-Jun inhaled. “Was a man with kindness that was brutal. He gave up everything so he could be kind to you, who needed it. Even though it hurt his family.”

“I don’t understand.”

“His family needed him, but you and your family needed it more. He hurt them a little so that he could help you a lot. It damaged him, but he did not care so long as he could be kind to you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me I was meeting my family?”

“Jiang Wanyin is not your family.” Hanguang-Jun stared forward, cold and uncaring at the moment.

“Why? Because you think he killed my father?”

“He did.”

“*How?*” Sizhui insisted. His father believed in yelling in anger. In running in joy. In sobbing in depression. *He could yell at Hanguang-Jun if he needed to.* “He doesn’t seem to think that he did.”

“I tried to save your father’s life.” Hanguang-Jun’s voice was tense. He’d never yell, but Sizhui knew what Hanguang-Jun’s angry voice sounded like. “Jiang Wanyin made it so I did not.”

“That’s not the same,” Sizhui protested. “Can’t you just tell me what happened?”

“Our generation was that of war,” Hanguang-Jun said. “You are too young for such terrors yet.”

“And I cannot change your mind?”

Hanguang-Jun hummed.

“Then I shall take my leave once again. I’m taking Jingyi with me,” Hanguang-Jun narrowed his eyes. “I told you not to set up my bed.”

Hanguang-Jun was not pleased, but at least he didn't say no.

“Well?” Zizhen said once they were all packed into the carriage once again. “Did he say?”

“He said Uncle prevented him from saving my father's life, but he didn't explain what it means.”

“I mean, it's not *exactly* murder,” Jingyi mused. “But “not exactly murder” isn't much better.”

“It's a lot better!” Jin Ling said.

“How?” Jingyi protested. “We don't even know what it means! Why would Sect Leader Jiang actively prevent his brother's life from being saved? Why was it in jeopardy in the first place?”

“We're going to find out,” Zizhen said and wrapped an arm around Sizhui's shoulders. “I promise.”

“Ugh,” Jin Ling complained. “You're such an *optimist*.”

“I see no issue with that!”

Koi Tower was nothing like Sizhui was used to. He'd been there sparing few times, often as the head disciple to buffer Hanguang-Jun's distaste with everything. Lan Qiren was the real trouble, as he held no qualms with stating loudly how much he disapproved of everything around the tower. It was gaudy and greedy and grotesque with the blatant displays of fortune. He'd never been there as family.

But Jin Ling was happy to show them all to the personal quarters, where cousins from the Jin family would stay while visiting the head family. He had Sizhui situate himself in the one closest to his own room, with bright yellow curtains on the window and a big mirror, a sitting corridor of his own.

Sizhui unpacked his things slowly. He placed each talisman along the desk, trying to mimic how they had been set up on the table at Lotus Pier. He'd never thought there was much rhyme or reason to the way his father had his workbench laid out. Even in the one vision they'd seen, where his toy dragon and butterfly were laid next to a sleeping pad on a giant rock, the workbench seemed like a mess. Like a mad genius who needed to get the ideas out far more than he needed the ideas to make sense. It made sense, considering his father was a mad genius –

His father.

His father that wasn't his father. Did it matter? If his birth parents never got to meet him, did it count? He raised his hand, drawing the talisman as his mind wondered. This man who caused so much – caused so much - caused so *much*?

Sizhui turned. His father stood, swaying side to side. A-Yuan was in his arms, head tucked under his father's chin, looking slightly tucked out. He had two fingers stuck in his mouth for self-soothing, and his father swayed side to side, rocking the child lightly.

"I love you,

A bushel and a peck

A bushel and a peck

And it beats me all to heck."

Sizhui smiled, a soft, heartbroken laugh petering out of his chest.

"It beats me all to heck how I'll ever tend the farm

Ever tend the farm when I wanna keep my arm,

About you. About you.

Cause I love you,

A bushel and a peck

You bet your pretty neck I do.”

No, Sizhui decided. That was his father. Whoever the strange man was, even if he didn't birth Sizhui from his own body, he made his stance clear. And Sizhui loved him too. What a strange realization it was to feel like one could pick the family they held dear. Hanguang-Jun was still a father, his father, his adoptive one put right. Who stuck up for him when Lan Qiren made his distaste clear. He taught Sizhui to count, to hold a sword, to speak clearly, to lace his belt. It was Hanguang-Jun who helped him through so much.

But now, he realized, there was room in his heart for so much more. That was *okay*. To decide one could pick family, and he would still pick Hanguang-Jun.

He would pick Jingyi and Zizhen, too, and he would pick Jin Ling, no matter what irritation it may cause Jingyi. And whoever this man was, he picked him, too.

“I would have been the most filial son to you,” Sizhui told the apparition. The man smiled and nuzzled his cheek to A-Yuan's forehead. “I still will be. If I am to be Sect Leader Jiang one day, then I will attempt the impossible for you.”

“I suppose we can cross all the ones named Jiang off the list,” Jingyi said, unfolding a paper and scanning his eyes over it. While the Jin Library wasn't *quite* famous for its deep, inquisitive knowledge like the Lan Library was, it was richly extensive. Emphasis on rich. The library halls were tall and filled high, and some of the titles were written in gold, glittering ink. The librarians must have been paid quite well, and while many of the books weren't useful, they had Zizhen set on edge that they weren't here for adventures in joyful reading.

Instead, they were looking up the battles of the Sunshot Campaign, the only named war that they actually knew for sure that their parents' generation had fought in. There was more than one, but they only knew the name from a sparing conversation with Sect Leader Nie when the man was too distracted to guard his words.

“Why is that?”

“Well, he was adopted, right?” Jingyi said. “And according to you, Mistress Yu wasn’t fond of your father-“

“I’m pretty sure she hated him-“ Jin Ling said.

“That can’t be true,” Zizhen frowned. “Parents don’t hate their children.”

“She did,” Sizhui said. Lans don’t lie, so Zizhen pouted and set himself back down.

“As I was *saying*,” Jingyi glared. “If Mistress Yu didn’t like him, she wouldn’t have let Former Sect Leader Jiang give him their name. That’s doubly true if he was such good friends with Sizhui’s *grandparents* and wanted to respect their contributions to their sons’ life. So, his name would have been his original name, and therefore, it wouldn’t be Jiang.”

“That’s great. We can check off exactly one name from the list of possibilities.” Jingyi rolled his eyes.

The list of combatants was rather long. Sizhui groaned. Going through a massive list of soldiers just to figure out which one might be the name of his father was –“This will take forever.”

“It’s alright,” Zizhen promised. “We’re all very determined.”

The doors of the library burst open. There was a flurry of yellow robes accented pink as someone spun in, slamming the doors behind and then peeking through the crack.

“Auntie?” Jin Ling frowned from his seat at the library table. The Jin Regent straightened her posture, turning just so to face the quartet. She blinked, inhaling to straighten, and walked forward.

“Rulan,” she said with a furrow to her brow. “I didn’t think you’d be in here.... Why are you in here?”

Qin Su wore the face that told her story. Someone who never held an interest in the intricacies of politics, who just wanted the simple life with a husband and family she loved, but the dreams were murdered in front of her. Someone forced into a leadership position. Someone truly *exhausted* with the way their life panned out. Sizhui imagined that politics were draining for anyone, and that had to be doubly, triple-y true for someone whose family had been killed by it. Or rather, a woman who witnessed her beloved husband kill their child for the sake of some political motivation that Sizhui had yet to understand.

“These are some of my classmates,” Jin Ling said. “Lan Sizhui, Lan Jingyi, and Ouyang Zizhen. We’re conducting some research.”

Each of them bowed at their names, though he imagined she could tell at least which one was Ouyang Zizhen from their appearances.

“What are *you* doing, Auntie?” Jin Ling asked.

She frowned. “A dam near a farming village seems as though it will flood in the oncoming months. They want me to make a plan.”

“Oh,” Jin Ling said. “I’m certain you’ve already told them to begin slowly releasing some of the water into the nearby river so it can lower the pressure.”

It was said diplomatically like Jin Ling was giving Qin Su the out to say it was her idea all along.

“I can’t do that if it will *cause* a flood. They want to know if it will destroy their crops, if they need to evacuate. I cannot see the future!”

“If the dam is *slowly* leaked into the nearby river and it is slowly released over the course of the many oncoming months, then there won’t be a need for evacuation because it will *prevent* the flooding.”

Qin Su sagged against the nearby bookshelves. She seemed in deep need of a good night’s sleep, in Sizhui’s opinion. She hadn’t needed to step up as a regent, as far as Sizhui was aware. Jin Ling had been fourteen when Jin Guangyao was ousted, and there had been younger sect leaders than that during times of war. She definitely hadn’t needed to hold on to the position for so long. Sizhui knew for a fact that Jiang Cheng had been *sixteen* when he took over, and Qin Su was waiting for Jin Ling to be even older than that.

Jin Ling was seventeen, to be eighteen in the oncoming months. She seemed eager for the day, but that eagerness did nothing to dampen the respect Sizhui held for her. Seeing her, seeing the toll it took on her, spoke of nothing but strength. Not everyone could hold out in a joyless job they were bad at just to keep someone else from behind thrown in the deep end.

“Why are you researching? Or what?”

“The Sunshot Campaign, Sect Leader Jin,” Zizhen said, bowing his head to her once again. “We thank you for letting us use your great library!”

“Of course, young master,” Qin Su said. She stepped forward, putting a resting hand on Jin Ling’s shoulder. “I didn’t know they were *allowing* that in lectures yet. When did that happen?”

“Just recently,” Jin Ling said. It wasn’t *technically* lying, right? Qin Su was the one who thought it was for their education, so, technically, they hadn’t said anything that was not truthful.

“Sect Leader Jin, I was actually wondering if I could ask you some questions. If you have the spare time!” Jingyi asked. Sizhui turned, furrowing his brows in question.

“I wasn’t a soldier then; I don’t believe I could answer very many.”

“Oh, it’s not about that, not directly, anyway.” Jingyi shook his head.

“Then feel free.”

Feel free. It was an entirely different direction from anyone Sizhui had asked recently. There were just dissuasions or the promise that not every question would be answered. How strange that was.

“We were just at Lotus Pier, you see. We were wondering if you knew of Sect Leader Jiang’s brother?” Jingyi asked. Sizhui’s eyes widened, and he could feel everyone pin their eyes to Qin Su. She didn’t seem to notice.

“His brother? You mean Wei Wuxian?”

Something Dark Inside

Chapter Summary

“Not at all. It’s just that... my husband and father-in-law told everyone that he was lying and building an army of cultivating Wens and fierce corpses in the Burial Mounds.”

“Did no one check?” Jingyi protested. “Seems pretty simple to figure out. Just go and look.”

“Wei Wuxian?”

He wasn’t sure who said it. Probably Zizhen. Sizhui sat in a shock, almost. It was so *easy* for her to say, clearly uncaring as if it was no big deal. Maybe to her, it wasn’t? They’d given her no clue the name had been hidden. She merely draped an arm back, almost with a sigh as she waved down a librarian.

“Can you bring these young masters some tea, please? With a cup for me, just don’t tell anyone I’m here,” Qin Su said. The librarian bowed with deep respect, seemingly unaware as Qin Su was of the massive information.

“Do... do you think you could tell us about him?” Jingyi asked.

“I suppose he is the most interesting part of the whole Campaign.” The Jin Sect Leader mused. “Although, I doubt many would refer to him specifically as Sect Leader Jiang’s brother.”

She gave a solid glance to Jin Ling. “Although your mother would rather die than anyone refer to him as anything else. She was a very loving woman.”

“Wait, so...” Zizhen raised a hand. “So Mistress Jiang Yanli thought of him as a brother, but Sect Leader Jiang didn’t?”

“Not *quite* like that. It’s only that Mistress Jiang was more at ease with verbalizing and gesturing her affection. She forced a Jin cousin to bow to him in apology, and that guy didn’t appreciate it considering... well, Wei Wuxian was never formally adopted by the Jiangs, and he was still a son of a servant.”

“And a rogue cultivator,” Sizhui said.

Qin Su smiled. “Yes, I heard she was very strong.”

“I want to backtrack. I do *not* understand the family dynamic going on here,” Jingyi said. “Like, at *all*. So he was adopted, but he wasn’t adopted?”

Qin Su huffed as if trying to think for a moment. The librarian came in, pouring each and everyone a cup of tea, before bowing out back to return to her regular duties as Qin Su took a sip. “I wasn’t *into* politics back then, you must remember. What I know from my time here is that Previous Sect Leader Jiang was married to a woman everyone called the Violet Spider. *She* was worried that her husband was in love with Wei Wuxian’s mother and that there would be rumors that he was *actually* Wei Wuxian’s father, and if Wei Wuxian was adopted formally, then he might receive the title of Sect Heir *instead* of her son. It didn’t help that Wei Wuxian was a few days older than Sect Leader Jiang and was smarter than him. I think for a while, they were called the Twin Heroes of Yunmeng? Ugh, I miss idle gossip.”

She blew a small stream of cold air on her cup of tea before politely sipping. “Perfect. Thank you!”

She leaned back, calling to the librarian. The librarian smiled, a bit truer, and bowed again.

“This is so much information,” Zizhen said, his eyes a little wide.

“But even if Grandfather were Wei Wuxian’s father, he’d have been born out of wedlock,” Jin Ling said. “He’d have to be legitimized. Surely she could afford to give him some comfort of an adoption.”

Qin Su shook her head. "I'm sorry to tell you, but your maternal grandmother was known for being incredibly violent, and she thought of her husband as quite the coward. She just made sure that the thought couldn't ever come to be and made her frustrations quite clear. I think she was an assassin. Or was her *sect* assassins? Somewhere in the family, an assassin was mentioned."

"You're being very helpful," Jin Ling said.

"I'm sorry, Sect Leader. It's only we have so many questions, and now that we have a few questions, we have more," Sizhui said. "Could you tell us how did Wei Wuxian die?"

She blinked at him. "Oh, he tried to kill himself."

Jingyi spluttered his coffee. Zizhen reached over, quickly patting Jingyi on the back to help him cough the tea that probably had gone up his nose. Sizhui felt very cold all of a sudden. "What do you *mean*?"

She poured herself more tea, but even so, she was scanning their faces. "It was after the Sunshot Campaign. He'd pretty much won it single-handedly, except for.... Well, my husband had landed the killing blow that ended it. Wei Wuxian had used nontraditional cultivation to do so. Despite winning the war, he was not hailed as a hero."

"Why not?" Jin Ling asked.

"He cultivated resentful energy," Qin Su said. "You must remember, my goals were elsewhere at the time. I did think it *odd* that everyone was so against him, but it was explained to me very simply. He won the war by using their own cultivation against the Wens. People didn't like how powerful he was, and people didn't like that their debts laid in one man who wasn't so stoically polite."

"What do you mean?" Zizhen asked.

“I mean.... He was polite, of course, but... he was playful about it. He was always playful, and if he thought you were wrong about something, he’d stomp up to you and say so. Or punch you in the face.” She patted Jin Ling’s shoulder. “He did that once. He punched your dad straight in the nose when they were fifteen when your dad said something mean about your mom. It didn’t matter that he was the son of a servant and your dad a sect heir. He said something mean about Wei Wuxian’s sister, and Wei Wuxian beat him so bad they both got kicked out of lectures.”

She laughed because whatever it was, it was a laugh riot to her. It was funny. Meanwhile, Sizhui felt sick to his stomach. If he tried to drink the tea, he was afraid he’d throw it up on the one person who was daring to give them answers. He picked it up, hiding the cup behind his hand and pretended to drink instead. His father killed himself. His father *killed himself*. His father left him. Or... was it -? His father killed himself.

“If you don’t mind,” Sizhui said.

“Right, of course.” Qin Su said. “You must remember, your paternal grandfather, Jin Rulan, and my husband, well. We didn’t know all the things about my husband that we do now. Jin Guangshan took all the remaining Wens, and he claimed they were all cultivators who fought for the Wen leader. He said he was keeping them safe and separated to live out their days privately and away from the rest of the cultivation world. Wei Wuxian claimed differently. He ... broke into the Wen Camps and broke them out. From what I remember, quite a few Jin guards died that day. Do you know about the Burial Mounds?”

“Yeah. It’s that creepy forest.” Jingyi said.

“There’s a bunch of bodies in there,” Zizhen said.

“I’m pretty sure it’s haunted.” Jin Ling said. That, somehow, made Qin Su laugh.

“It was more than haunted. Before Wei Wuxian went there, it was impossible. For generations, only the bravest and craziest cultivators went there, claiming to try and cleanse the grounds, and they never returned. It was a horror show. If someone went *near* the perimeter, they wouldn’t return. It was filled with walking corpses and vengeful spirits. But

Wei Wuxian took all the surviving Wens and set up camp in there, and *he* cleansed it. He said that Jin Guangshan lied. That all the people he had were the elderly and disabled, that they weren't even the Wens that fought in the war, but a different family branch. He said that they were being tortured. Starved. All sorts of horrible things."

"Babies," Sizhui said. *You were adopted. Your father died in war—your mother in birth.* Qin Su looked up.

"I suppose looking back," She said. "It wouldn't be too surprising if my husband had tortured a baby as well."

Zizhen made a noise. Sizhui looked up, seeing his friend holding a fist in front of his mouth, a sick green shade on his face as his cheeks blew up like potatoes. The poor romantic must have been sick.

"That doesn't sound bad, though," Jin Ling said loudly. Probably to get the attention off of Zizhen so he could swallow with no one looking. "I mean, of Wei Wuxian."

"Not at all. It's just that... my husband and father-in-law told everyone that he was lying and building an army of cultivating Wens and fierce corpses in the Burial Mounds."

"Did no one *check*?" Jingyi protested. "Seems pretty simple to figure out. Just go and *look*."

Qin Su sighed. "I suppose that would have been easy to solve. Expect that people wanted Wei Wuxian to be guilty. He was incredibly powerful, and he didn't behave in the way people liked. He wasn't *traditional*. He was a rebel. If Wei Wuxian was gone, then things would just... go back to normal."

"Didn't anyone stand up for him? Surely someone else agreed that—" *my family*, Sizhui wanted to say. "That the Wens didn't deserve torture."

“The Jiang Sect was nearly destroyed during the war.” Qin Su said. “They couldn’t support Wei Wuxian. And if I understand some of the conversations correctly, Wei Wuxian asked to be kicked out of the sect so that his actions wouldn’t pull them down as Jiang Wanyin tried to rebuild. I don’t think he enjoyed it.”

“What about Hanguang-Jun?” Zizhen asked. Jingyi shot him a confused look, and Sizhui followed. Why on earth would Hanguang-Jun be expected to do so?

“Oh, he did, quite a few times,” Qin Su said. Sizhui and Jingyi turned their confusion to her. “And he continued to do so after his death. From what I understand, he was punished severely and whipped quite a large number of times for doing so.”

“He was *whipped* for standing up for Wei Wuxian?”

“It became widely believed that Wei Wuxian was evil,” Qin Su said. “I mean, eating children for breakfast, bathing in blood, cultivating demons, *evil*.”

“He attended lectures with some of those people. Surely they knew better,” Jin Ling protested. “Surely someone pointed out that they fought a war with him. They knew he wouldn’t fall so far.”

Qin Su swallowed. “My husband is to blame.”

There was a pause. A cold, shivering pause. Sizhui exhaled, “Regent Sect Leader Jin?”

She shook herself. “I’m alright. Jin Guangyao... we know now that he began blaming much of his wrongdoing on Wei Wuxian. I’m not sure if he’s to blame for the rumors of eating children and all that. But he blamed his murders on Wei Wuxian, his curses. There Wei Wuxian was... trying to farm in a place with no sunlight while my husband used him endlessly as a scapegoat. He couldn’t attend his own sister’s wedding because of it.”

She drank the tea, but the look on her face said she wanted it to be another drink entirely. Sizhui did too. His father killed himself. His father couldn't attend his sister's wedding. Couldn't watch her take her bows. The memories were beginning to make sense. The rags. The starving. The wedding red.

“The Wens turned themselves in eventually. They claimed their innocence but said they were sick of watching Wei Wuxian kill himself to protect them. Jin Guangyao claimed they were still lying and playing all the sects for fools. Each and every last one was burned. I don't know how they turned themselves in behind his back, but Wei Wuxian came. He found there was no one left.”

But me. There was me. He could have stayed for me. Sizhui tried to keep his eyes from watering. She didn't know. He didn't even know. Maybe he wasn't a Wen. Maybe he wasn't tortured as a baby. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

“I don't know how it got out of control,” Qin Su said. “But there was a battle that day, and Jin Rulan, your mother...”

She sighed and squeezed his shoulder. “She tried to protect her baby brothers and paid the price for it. Even though everyone believed he had killed her husband just days before, she tried to protect him. The world was against him except for her. When she died, he had nothing left. He threw himself off the cliff. They say Hanguang-Jun caught him, tried to pull him back, and then his own brother landed the killing blow, making sure that suicide fell through.”

She shifted, putting her hands in her lap. “After, they tried to raid the Burial Mounds campsite, and Hanguang-Jun kept them from picking it entirely clean. He was punished for protecting Wei Wuxian and his cave.”

“Excuse me, Regent Sect Leader,” Sizhui said. He stood abruptly. “I – I think I need to lay down.”

Jingyi stood, reaching out to take his arm. “We beg your pardon, mistress. Do you mind if we ask you the rest of our questions later?”

“Not at all, is everything alright?”

“As well as it can be!” Zizhen said.

Dear Hanguang-Jun,

~~*Regent Sect Leader Jin is more open—*~~

We have found someone to answer our questions, but now I have many. Am I a Wen? Why did he kill himself when I was still here?

“I’ve never seen a *Lan* fidget like you.” Jin Ling worked the brush through his hair, starting at the ends as he worked in the oil.

“I don’t usually.” Sizhui said.

“Yeah, I know.” Jin Ling said. “Bit of a long day.”

Sizhui would nod, but it probably wasn’t the best idea now. He wanted to curl up in a ball, stay in bed until the sun came up, but there were at least two rules about the appropriate time to go to bed, not to dally about it. “Do you think I’m a Wen?”

Jin Ling shrugged. “I suppose it makes sense. But it can’t be for certain.”

“Do you think I’m a Lan?”

Jin Ling looked up, staring at him through the reflection in the polished silver. “You... you were raised one. After Wei Wuxian.”

Wei Wuxian. It was a nice name. Wei Sizhui. Wei Yuan. *Wei Yuan....*

“I guess I always did wonder if you were born one, before all this started,” Jin Ling said. “It never seemed to me that Lan Qiren was too fond of you.”

“I’m sorry,” Sizhui said.

“About what?”

“You and Jingyi.”

Jin Ling stilled, come stuck in the middle of Sizhui’s hair. “Am. . . am I very obvious?”

“Not at all! I’m pretty sure Jingyi has no clue at all.” Sizhui said. “I didn’t have a clue, not until I spent more time with you. And . . . Zizhen has said some things, that with my time with you, clued me in.”

“If Zizhen points out my staring one more time, I *swear*,” Jin Ling muttered. He shook his hair, resuming the brushing. “I guess, I just thought one day, Lan Qiren would recognize you as Hanguang-Jun’s kid. You’d be third in line and Jingyi would never have to become sect leader Lan and . . . and we’d have a chance.”

“You still do.”

“Two future sect leaders can’t be together.” Jin Ling shook his head. “It doesn’t matter now, I guess. Other than Lan Qiren is still a dick for not recognizing you. You were adopted outright.”

“It’s not all on Lan Qiren.”

“What, do you expect Zewu-Jun to do it? He hates upsetting his uncle, and he’s still half in seclusion, I don’t even know what for.” Jin Ling huffed. “Though I guess it’s to do with all

this mess. Do you think Lan Qiren won't recognize you because your other dad was Wei Wuxian?"

"Perhaps," Sizhui said. If Lan Qiren still had a bad taste in his mouth due to all the awful rumors Jin Guangyao had spread, maybe so. Or maybe it was some kind of misguided guilt. Like... "Uncle Jiang. He did stutter. He was stuck between saying everyone and no one did it."

Jin Ling frowned. "Everyone... the world that turned against him wrongly. No one... he threw himself off of a cliff."

"But Hanguang-Jun caught him."

"And Uncle... did something that caused him to fall further," Jin Ling twisted his mouth to the side. "It's such a big mess."

"Whatever he did, he must feel very guilty over." Sizhui said. The last words still hit him hard, the last things their uncle had said. Jin Ling looked up at their reflection again, glaring.

"You're not going to be Jiang Sect Leader."

"Why do you say so?"

"Because! One day Uncle will marry. He'll have a kid, and he's not the type to care if his heir is a boy or a girl," He tutted. "So you'll stay here, and as well raised Lan in my advisors, you'll help return the Jin honor, and I'll take care of you until we're old and gross. You know, I bet one of the reasons he stayed single is because he felt so bad about people thinking he killed his own brother. But now you came back to him... he can start meeting with matchmakers once this is all over."

Sizhui laughed, covering his chin with his sleeve politely. He looked back up. "Do you want to put your Jin beads in my hair?"

Jin Ling looked up. His own hair had it, the thin threads of cold highlighting the dark hair, gold beads peeking through every few inches. “Really? But-?”

“I don’t feel very Lan right now,” Sizhui said. “And I’m here as your cousin, aren’t I?”

Jin Ling grinned, and quickly bolted, probably to go as fast as he could to get the beading before Sizhui could change his mind.

Lan Sizhui;

You are. He was led to believe you were among the dead.

Hanguang-Jun was smart enough to know he couldn’t stop Sizhui from learning when he was so far away.

There was wind in the trees. The trees themselves were baren, each branch spiking, sharp, and twisted with knots. The wood was an eery gray, and the dim light was hardly better. Everything was gray and dead.

“We need money for blankets. Winter is around the corner, and we have every reason to believe it will be brutal.” A woman said, the gray, drab robes hanging off of her brutal thin shoulders.

Wei Wuxian held a toy wooden sword, and A-Yuan swung at it uselessly, despite his great show of how *great* a swordsman the toddler was. “Ah! A-Yuan! You defeat me!”

“This is the burial mound, isn’t it?” Jingyi looked around. Dead branches stuck out of the ground, and the shadows were designed to create nightmares, it seemed.

“How can anything survive in here?” Zizhen said. “How can one farm radishes? There’s no sunlight.”

“I’m assuming having a mad genius on your side helps.” Jin Ling said. “That cave. Sizhui, is that the cave we saw before?”

Sizhui nodded.

Jin Ling turned his head slightly, reading the sign. “Demon Subdue Cave. Do you think that was there before they came here or after?”

“I don’t think they can afford great big signs,” Zizhen said.

“Fly! Fly, fly, fly,” A-Yuan said.

“Oh, you want to fly?” Wei Wuxian said. He dropped the toys and picked A-Yuan up, tossing him in the air a bit. “Fly?”

A-Yuan giggled, but the woman didn’t seem amused. “Are you listening to me at all?”

“It will be *fine*, Wen Qing,” He insisted. “I’ll invent something, and we’ll sell it in Yiling.”

“Because that’s so simple.”

“It is!” Wei Wuxian said. “Perhaps... a compass, to point out dark energy. That could be good.”

“He could have put these talismans together himself,” Sizhui said. His friends turned to him.

“What do you mean?” Zizhen asked.

“He made these talismans. It would have been *easy* for him to put the three together so he could see the place and the people and hear them at the same time. It would have been nothing! But he made more talismans concerning the past.”

“What... do you mean?” Jingyi asked, narrowing his eyes as his arms crossed over his chest.

“I mean.... Going *into* the past and pulling it forward.” Sizhui said. “I’m part Jiang. I will attempt the impossible.”

Find my Fathers Shrapnel Buried Beneath my Skin

Chapter Summary

“There’s got to be something here,” Zizhen groaned. “We always find something, don’t we? We always find some clue-“

He’d dropped back, seeming to lean against the mirror that had been mounted on the wall. Instead he yelped, arms flailing as the surface of the mirror began to ripple and Zizhen disappeared like he’d fallen through a pond.

“Zizhen!” A chorus cried out. The boys rushed forward, but Zizhen quickly came back through the mirror, looking slightly stunned.

“Found it.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You let him put *Jin Gold* in your hair.”

“You know what, Jingyi?” Sizhui said, closing the book in his hands as he looked up at his friend. Yes, he had the matching gold strands that Jin Ling wore, with the beads popping out now and then from his inky black hair, as it did for Jin Ling... though his were more embroidered, slightly. “That is hardly the biggest concern on my mind right now.”

“And if you think I’ll let him take it back out again now, you’ll have another thing coming.” Jin Ling piped up from further down the room. Qin Su chuckled, seemingly entertained by their antics she watched from just beyond the doorway. She refused to enter, but at least she allowed them to search for clues. Honestly, Sizhui wondered what was going through her mind. Or did she just think, well, teenagers can be freaking strange sometimes, and go on with her day.

“You know what I think?” Zizhen grinned. He sidled up between the two Lans, wrapping an arm around each of their shoulders. “Perhaps Jingyi is jealous. Do not fear, my friend, I’m sure Jin Rulan would be happy to comb your hair and put his gold in it-“

“Zizhen!” Jin Ling yelped, stomping a foot down. Sizhui now noticed it – just the barest *hint* of a blush darkening on Jin Ling’s cheeks, so faint it almost looked like just a shadow. No wonder he missed it all these years. Sizhui ducked a hand behind his sleeve to hide a small laugh.

“It’s totally fine. I mean, look how nice our dear friend Sizhui’s hair looks. It’s very shiny, Jin Ling must be very good at oiling and combing hair.” Zizhen went on.

“I’m not putting gold in my hair,” Jingyi said.

“You don’t have to, perhaps he can just comb your hair. It would be very nice!”

“*Zi-zhen!*” Jin Ling whined again. Zizhen smiled widely, pulling his arms off of the Lans and retreating with a grin. Sizhui could almost feel how Zizhen was trying to reign in his own snickers after teasing Jin Ling so.

“We are *Lans*,” Jingyi said. “None of this is appropriate.”

“You’re the least Lan-like Lan that I’ve ever met,” Jin Ling muttered.

“Besides,” Sizhui said. “It’s hardly the strangest thing we’ve been through... in general.”

He added that on as Qin Su watched, supervising from the porch area. There wasn’t much to look through, really. It was almost disappointing. For a man with such an odd history, Jin Guangyao’s office seemed to have no secrets. There were no notebooks, certainly no talismans, no artifacts of great worrisome power. There was a painting of Qin Su on his desk, now aged over the years as everyone left the room alone. Maybe they thought it was haunted by all of his misdeeds.

“Why is all this stuff still here?” Jingyi asked.

“No one may enter a sect leader’s private office without their permission,” Jin Ling said. “At least not in Koi Tower. I think my paternal grandfather was real strict with that rule, and Jin Guangyao did nothing to change it.”

Qin Su was... quiet. Zizhen leaned over the desk, whispering to keep her unbothered. “I can’t imagine going through this stuff to clean it out would be very easy for her, anyway.”

Maybe she didn’t have the right to, anyway, as the regent leader, anyway, but she’d be the closest person allowed to do so until Jin Ling had his ceremony. If the Jin reputation was still dragging, Sizhui doubted keeping all this stuff here was helping anyone.

“I still can’t believe he was able to do all this so easily,” Jingyi muttered. He had picked up a stack of papers, though his expression still said whatever was written on them was just as useless as everything else.

“Politics,” Qin Su said. Her voice was so, so tired. Like her very throat was drained of life. “My husband always positioned himself as politically the better choice. It’s the politics of all this.”

“Whoa,” Jingyi said. “I think I hate politics.”

A quartet of juniors, of possibly would be future sect leaders, felt a boulder rest on their shoulders. Sizhui frowned – Jin Ling had made it clear he didn’t think Sizhui would ever become the Jiang Sect leader, and really, he figured that was true. What sect would want an outsider as their leader? Sizhui was still, at the end of the day, *Lan* Sizhui. It had been his name for years. For the first time in a while, he was a little bit pleased that he had been adopted. The looks on his friends’ faces were despondent. Each one was trying to figure out if it could happen to them. Could they ever be the cause of deaths like the fate of Wei Wuxian?

“There’s got to be something here,” Zizhen groaned. “We always find something, don’t we? We always find some clue-“

He'd dropped back, seeming to lean against the mirror that had been mounted on the wall. Instead, he yelped, arms flailing as the surface of the mirror began to ripple and Zizhen disappeared as if he'd fallen through a pond.

"Zizhen!" A chorus cried out. The boys rushed forward, but Zizhen quickly came back through the mirror, looking slightly stunned.

"Found it," He said plainly, expression almost blank. Probably, Sizhui pondered, he was still stunned after falling through something that was not meant to be fallen through. Sizhui reached forward, touching the mirror's surface. Like the surface of a lake, it just pooled out from his fingertip, and yet it didn't feel wet. It felt like nothing at all. Sizhui turned.

"Did you know of this?" Sizhui asked Qin Su. She shook her head, taking a small step away from the door, even further back.

"It's okay, Auntie," Jin Ling said. "If you want to deal with the dam instead of this, it's okay. We'll call for you if we need you."

"You should have an adult here," Qin Su said. "I don't know what sort of horrors he'd have in his... hidden trophy room."

"And we thank you for looking after us," Zizhen said. Jingyi was glaring at the large mirror, eyes slightly narrowed as Zizhen bowed to Qin Su. Sizhui could practically feel the gears turning in his fellow Lans head, and none of the proffered questions could lead anywhere kind.

Jin Ling was the first to go in, not waiting for a moment to question. Zizhen followed, with just a tut of his tongue and a shake of his head. Sizhui tilted his head to Jingyi. "Do you want to go in next?"

"It's your mission, *Jin Sizhui*."

Sizhui tilted his head. *Do not roll your eyes.* “Speak plainly. What’s wrong?”

“Don’t recite the rules at me when you’re wearing gold in your hair,” Jingyi said. He gestured wildly to the mirror. “Would you get a move on?”

Sizhui shook his head and stepped through the mirror. Qin Su was right about it: the hidden place seemed every inch like a trophy room. It was filled with odds and ends, papers on desks more used and worn than the seeming showroom of an office they had come through from.

“Whoa.” Jin Ling said. He picked up a small statue off of a shelf, looking it over. “It’s going to take ages to catalog all this stuff. What even is it?”

Zizhen picked something off of a shelf, looking it over. Thin, wood-like, and covered in carvings. “Suibian. Suibian?”

“Must be some weapon,” Sizhui said. “A sword, perhaps?”

“I think so,” Zizhen said. He grabbed the top of it, pulling. “It’s quite thin to be a sword. Whosever it is, it’s sealed itself.”

“Perhaps it’s mad that Jin Guangyao touched it,” Jingyi suggested, looking through a magnifying glass at them. He laughed brightly before turning back, spurring the others to join in. Sizhui laughed, shoulders shaking as he went to face his own shelf and –

“O- oh.” His face fell. Dead eyes stared back, milken over the dark irises that must have been, long ago. Preservation talismans circled it, a neck cut off short as it sat on a shelf. It just sat there, like some other bauble, forgotten and discarded. Like this wasn’t a person.

“What’s wro-“ Jingyi had started to say as he came up to stand beside Sizhui. It was Zizhen who came next, noting the silence from the Lans. It wasn’t silent for long as Zizhen quickly spun, grabbing the nearest empty pot to throw up into.

“What are you three babies looking at?” Jin Ling asked. He approached, but Sizhui didn’t see the expression on his face. He’d yet been able to tear his eyes away from the unblinking corpse. “That... that’s Nie Mingjue, isn’t it?”

“I think so,” Jingyi whispered. “Wasn’t that the rumor? Nie Huaisang had something to do with helping Qin Su take him down, right?”

“I thought it was just a rumor,” Sizhui said, voice just as quiet. No adult ever discussed such things, not around them. They knew that Nie Huaisang was the Sect Leader *now*, and for a long time, his reputation was that of the man who never had answers.

Things changed after Qin Su took over. It was hard to imagine any sect leader, even Nie Huaisang, being known as useless.

“We *barely* looked,” Zizhen said. “And yet we found a dead body.”

“We found a head.”

“What do we do with a head?” Sizhui asked. “That’s the head of a *sect leader*.”

“Why is his head here?” Jingyi asked. “Didn’t he die of natural causes?”

Oh, hell. Sizhui racked his brain. There were *rumors*, fine. Rumors that the sworn brothers weren’t as close as they were supposed to be, but it was just rumored. This was a sect leader, and a beloved one. Jin Guangyao had the head of a sect leader on his shelf and –

“What do we do?” Zizhen asked. “If we tell Nie Huaisang that his older brother – his older brother’s head is here.”

Sizhui heard gagging again. He reached back blindly, landing his hand on Zizhen's back to instinctively rub comforting circles into his shoulders.

"It could cause a war." Jingyi finished. "Desecrating his body like that, it's not going to go over well."

"Well, I doubt *hiding* it would go over any better." Jin Ling protested. "I'm not seeing a lot of good options here."

"You have to tell him," Zizhen said. He spat once, and straightened, Sizhui's arm falling to the wayside. Finally, he felt able to tear his eyes from the ashen face. It was just the four of them again, standing in a circle. Zizhen wiped his face, eyes going to each one of his friends.

"We have to do it right," Jin Ling said. "We'd have to do it *carefully*."

"No, you don't. You have to do it fast and without thought." Zizhen insisted. His voice raised, just slightly. "You heard what Qin Su said. It's the politics that killed Wei Wuxian. So... so screw the politics!"

Jin Ling looked appalled. Zizhen shook his head again and just grabbed their hands, grabbed Jin Ling in one, Sizhui in the other. After a moment, Sizhui reached, taking Jingyi. Jin Ling followed suit, until the quartet was just in a circle, trying desperately to ignore the feeling of dead eyes staring into them.

"Look at us," Zizhen said. "Most of us will be in charge of many people someday, and if Sect Leader Jiang never marries, then all of us will. We're going to have to be the ones to change things if we want them changed. The right thing to do is to get Nie Mingjue home as soon as possible, isn't it?"

"What if it causes a war?" Jin Ling said.

“Then people are stupid,” Zizhen insisted. “If people want to be mad at you for *finding* it, then they’re stupid. The goal is only to bring him home, yes? So get Sect Leader Nie here as soon as possible, present it to him as soon and simply as possible, and speak the truth. Maybe what matters is... if our parents weren’t sect leaders, would they be proud of us?”

Dear Hanguang-Jun,

Would I make Wei Wuxian proud?

“So, do we ignore the ones that don’t do anything, or what?” Zizhen asked. He was trying to organize the piles on piles of talismans as Sizhui looked through yet another textbook on talismans. So far, his uncle’s words were ringing true. Nothing in the textbooks seemed to even touch on Wei Wuxian’s ability to craft new talismans out of nothing. Sizhui wondered if he’d get a headache from studying something his father had crushed by the time he was twelve.

“They have to do something,” Sizhui insisted. “He wouldn’t have kept them if they weren’t worthwhile.”

“Do we know that?” Jingyi asked. He held up a talisman of his own. “I mean what do we know about the man beside the fact that he’s absolutely-”

“Sh.” Zizhen snapped. He held up another paper, face falling just so.

“What is it?” Jin Ling asked.

“Nope. Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Zizhen.”

“Um.” Zizhen frowned. “I uh. Well. It seems Wei Wuxian made a talisman for ‘Lan Zhan.’ Called. It’s called. It’s called? Bonding.”

“Weird that,” Jingyi said.

Zizhen narrowed his eyes, glaring at Jingyi. Jingyi only tilted his head, just as confused as the rest of them. “Yeah. It’s only *weird*. Nothing more at all.”

“What has you upset now?”

“My friends are idiots, that’s what got me upset! Let’s just figure out how to travel in time, because it’s the easiest thing in the world, really.” Zizhen insisted.

“Calm down,” Jingyi said. Sizhui turned a page. He was going to have to abandon this book – there was *nothing*. He added it to the pile of discarded talisman texts next to him. “It’s not about to happen overnight.”

“How many people do you think have tried to travel back in time and failed?” Jin Ling asked. “The fact we’re trying at all is a bit out there, isn’t it?”

“I really don’t think all that many,” Sizhui said. “I bet most people just think, oh, if I could, and then they don’t try.”

“He has a point,” Zizhen said, waving a talisman in the air. “I bet most people just think of it as that thing not to bother with. We could be pioneers.”

“Zizhen,” Sizhui asked. He stood. “Let me see that.”

He approached, and Zizhen held out the talisman. He’d tested it once before, long before his friends came to Lotus Pier. There were the odd markings along the side of the talisman paper, the main charm doing absolutely nothing at all.

“Can I see that one too, please?” Sizhui asked. Zizhen handed him another paper and Sizhui held the two next to each other. “No... no. That one, please.”

Zizhen held up another and Sizhui put the two side to side. The markings along the side matched up. He felt his stomach start to stir and he looked up. “They’re parts of a whole. That’s what we’re missing, it’s not a bunch of talismans, it’s one large spell that has to work together.”

“Holy shit,” Jin Ling said. He and Jingyi sank to the floor, and they began searching through the talismans. Each of them began trying to piece together the puzzle, trying to connect the odd lines engraved in the paper with each other.

“Can I have that one,” Jingyi said. “I think it goes here.”

“No, it’s with mine, see,” Jin Ling said, taking the papers from Jingyi’s hands.

They began forming a ring throughout the dorm, talisman paper overlapping with talisman paper until the lines began overlapping furniture, circling the room and flowing over the bedframes, a spell that was larger than life.

“Whoa.”

Sizhui stepped nimbly over the large circle of runes. He looked down, trailing each line that he could. “Good thing I asked to keep his talismans.”

“We’re not really going to do this, are we?” Jingyi asked. “It’s... it’s crazy. This is a bit going past trying to help you in the time of need and bordering on insane!”

“We could save his life,” Sizhui said.

“I know that. And you know I wouldn’t say no if that’s what you wanted but... what if we just call forth his ghost?”

“This circle is too big to do anything that a mere *Inquiry* could do,” Jin Ling said. “What we need is... a really big space to perform this.”

“We’ll need a mountain,” Zizhen said. “And a time.”

“Isn’t the time just... hey, when do you think you’re available to freaking *break the timeline*?” Jingyi asked.

“He *means* moving Wei Wuxian,” Jin Ling said. “It’s not like we’re aiming to take a *baby* Wei Wuxian then raise him or something.”

“We have to take him at his death,” Sizhui stared into nothing, at the same time tracing the lines of the talismans. “We have to save him before he dies. Otherwise, we could change something and... and mess with something that changes everything about who we are. And then we won’t go back into time, and he’d die, and then we’d become who we are now and we **would** go back in time and-“

“Okay, we get it but seriously?” Jingyi asked. “You not only want to go back in time, but go back in time to when he was *suicidal* and *jumping off of a cliff*, and what, catch him?”

“Then a mountain would come in handy. Or a cliff,” Zizhen said. “If we put the talisman on the side of a big tall hill you could just sort of reach through, then, couldn’t you?”

“Why are you talking like you know?” Jin Ling asked. “We don’t know how any of this works.”

“However it works, we’re not going to get much of a test run,” Jingyi said. “Look at the size of this thing. The amount of spiritual energy this spell will take is massive.”

“If you don’t want to do it with me, I understand,” Sizhui said. “But I have to try.”

“Sizhui, you’re going to need all of us.” Zizhen insisted. “I mean, Jingyi is right. I don’t even know if our spiritual energy is going to be enough.”

They were right. It looked like it would take way more than the four of them to get the talisman to work. Sizhui swallowed rocks, mouth bitter and dry.

Dear Wei Wuxian,

“There’s no harm in trying,” He said decidedly. Jingyi grumbled.

Dear Wei Wuxian,

"There might be," Jingyi muttered. "I'm not saying I'm not kind of excited to be one of the first people to literally travel in time. That's cool. But we need to think, too."

Dear Wei Wuxian,

"Does anyone know what happens when you run out of spiritual power? Like actually run out?" Zizhen asked. Jingyi looked around and shook his head.

"It's okay." Jin Ling promised. His hand reached out, ever so slightly, like he was trying to work up the nerve to do something. Sizhui looked, and Jin Ling's eyes were drawn down, staring at Jingyi's hand before the cowardice in him grew, and he stopped trying to reach out. "We'll just come back here to rest and heal. We'll be safe here."

Sincerely,

Your son.

Happy Thanksgiving! How was your holiday? Mine was drama galore! The pregnancy announcements! The three-year-olds who took off their stripped naked and yelled, Behold the Underminer! The Engagement Rings! The fights! The I-Just-Woke-Up-But-Yes-I'm-STILL-Going-To-Fight-And-Rip-You-A-New-One! The phone calls from people we're No Contact With! Omg! I'm not even home yet! plz send me red bull I miss my cat

Anyway, that's why this chapter is late, so please, please, please forgive me :(

It's You I'm Fighting For

Chapter Summary

Jingyi was right. With everything going on, his foster father would be here before sunrise. Sizhui pressed his lips together for a moment, taking in a short breath. “If anyone does not wish to do this, now would be the time to say.”

“We’re talking about time travel.” Zizhen said. He smiled. “We are friends.”

“This is dangerous.”

“We’re running out of time.” Jingyi said. “If we do this, we’re not going to get a practice run. Do you guys get that? We’d need to do it now, and we can’t do it here.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The hall was quiet, so quiet, that when the doors opened, the bang echoed hard enough, Sizhui felt it echo in his bones. The Jin throne sat empty. It was just the four friends, and suddenly, it was so, so terrifying. Maybe they should have had the regent sect leader there. For a long time, the Nie Sect Leader was known for not knowing anything. *Mr. Know Nothing*, they called him. The Head Shaker.

“I once heard a rumor that he wouldn’t send a cultivator to fix a man eating bunker in his woods,” Zizhen whispered the night before the visit. “Just sat there in his sector for months.”

That didn’t make it feel any better. They were set to visit a sect leader with no one there to help. It was all Zizhen’s idea. *It’s the politics that killed him*. So don’t make it political to return the head.

And now Sect Leader Nie was entering the damn throne room, getting closer and closer, fan in hand with a few officials behind him. The four bowed deep, and Sect Leader Nie returned with a polite dip. “Young Masters. I was surprised to receive your invitation.”

“We are glad you came,” Jin Ling said. “We are sorry we couldn’t be more clear. It is not the sort of thing you put in a letter.”

“Your tone did convey something serious.” Sect Leader Nie said. “Where is the Regent Sect Leader?”

“She’ll be more than happy to receive you later,” Jin Ling said. “I’m sure you know my colleagues, and my cousin, Lan Sizhui?”

Sect Leader Nie froze, but only for a moment as the hand waving his fan stiffened. His eyes twisted over the top of the fan blades, glancing to Sizhui as realization melted over him. “Cousin?”

Jin Ling tilted his head. “It took me a moment as well.”

“Lan?” He asked. “And it was Hanguang-Jun who took you in?”

Sizhui bowed again. “Yes, sir.”

Sect Leader Nie smiled, lowering his fan. It was a bitter smile, but the relief was almost palpable. “Oh, let me look at you.”

They were getting off track, but perhaps a few moments would give Sect Leader Nie something good to bring home? Something... okay? He stepped forward, and Sect Leader Nie took him by the elbows. “Look at you. All grown up.”

He leaned in. “You know, your father and I once said we would be sworn brothers.”

Sizhui frowned. “You and... Hanguang-Jun?”

“Bah,” Sect Leader Nie scoffed. “The other father.”

Sizhui blinked. “You know?”

“Of course I know,” Sect Leader Nie said. “You grew up so well. He’d be proud of you.”

Sizhui had to grit his jaw, freeze his chest. It was hard not to make a sound. Would Wei Wuxian be proud of him? It felt like he’d done *nothing* with his life some days, when his father managed to do so very much. He tried to smile.

“Your father made so many people happy.” Sect Leader Nie said. “He was my best friend. Without him, there is great darkness. I expect you to bring back some light.”

“I’ll do my best,” Sizhui said.

“He does,” Jingyi said. “He already has.”

“Sect Leader,” Jin Ling said. “I’m afraid we have bad news.”

Sect Leader Nie stood straight up again, and looked at them. “Why isn’t the Regent Sect Leader giving it to me?”

“We felt you would want to receive the news as a brother,” Zizhen said. “Not as a politician.”

Nie Huaisang looked back at his advisors, “Leave.”

“Sir?” One said.

“Go.”

Jin Ling watched as the group of green dressed cultivators scrambled back, finally exiting the throne room before the doors shut. “We were exploring, and we found my uncle’s, the former sect leader, office. Well, we found his *hidden*, office. It was like a treasure room of some kind. Hidden trinkets and hidden... all sorts of creepy things.”

Zizhen picked up a box from a nearby table and bowed as he presented it to Nie Huaisang. “We wanted you to have this as soon as possible. We are so sorry that there is no perfect way to give it to you. And we’re so sorry we could not give him to you sooner.”

Nie Huaisang reached one hand across the top of the box and carefully lifted the lid. He whimpered, and Sizhui could barely hear the cry of *da-ge*, but he didn’t need to hear it to see the tear in his eye, the watering of the irises. The baby brother looked up, the boy who lost his family too young, and the smile wasn’t happy. “Thank you.”

He closed the box, and hugged it to his chest. “You didn’t do the right thing politically, but you did the right thing whole heartedly, entirely, humanely.”

“Thank you,” The boys said.

“You did the right thing,” He said again. “You’ll be rewarded.”

“Come with me to Gusu.” Hanguang-Jun said in memories. His father had a little A-Yuan on his hips, refusing to look his friend in the eyes. Zizhen sniffled and rubbed his eyes on his sleeves like it was something quite lovely and sweet. It wasn’t the first time they heard Hanguang-Jun say that. This time, with Wei Wuxian looking more haggard, his cheek bones more prominent, though his clothes darker and the reds more prominent, it was almost more intense.

“Stop it.” Zizhen insisted. “Stop the memory. Please.”

“Come back to me,” Hanguang-Jun said. “It will be home.”

“Zizhen,” Jingyi said, tilting his head slightly down like he was disappointed. Sizhui frowned. These memories were all he might have of his father if they didn’t get the spell to work.

“This feels private, between Master Wei and Hanguang-Jun,” Zizhen said.

“If it was private, perhaps they should not have done it in front of Sizhui.” Jin Ling said. “We’ve never been able to *stop* the memories anyway, they just fade.”

“Well, they probably thought he wouldn’t remember, he was just a baby, and we can plug our ears and cover our eyes.” Zizhen said.

“They’re not even *doing* anything!” Jingyi gestured wildly at them.

Zizhen groaned, wiping a hand over his face. “Why are all of you idiots?”

The memory did finally fade with all the grumblings from Zizhen, and nothing much was revealed. They had what they needed to know, and each stationed themselves around the mass of papers that they littered around Sizhui’s rooms. Wei Wuxian’s notes took up the entirety of Sizhui’s wing, travelling up and over his bed, across his desk, down the chair, it was massive. If they stood inside the diameter of it, they wouldn’t be able to touch each other’s hands.

“He wouldn’t be able to do this by himself, would he?” Jingyi asked, hands on hips. He walked slowly, one foot placing in front of the other after a slow count, one, two, three, like he was studying each swipe of ink. They all were. The amount of spiritual energy leaking in each stroke was immense. Once each paper was linked, they could feel the thrum, and they hadn’t even practiced the entire talisman yet.

“The Jiang Clan called him a mad genius for a reason, right?” Zizhen said.

“The emphasis was always more on *mad*,” Jin Ling said. He was staring at a complex section, hands out as he tried to master it. They had realized long ago how much energy it would take. Their stores would be depleted for days. Maybe weeks. Jin Ling shook his head. “Really, the emphasis was more on “*poor thing, sad story*” and I’m still waiting on why everyone seems to think Uncle killed him.”

“If we bring him back, they won’t.” Zizhen piped up. Sizhui frowned, turning to Zizhen. “Think about it. If we bring Wei Wuxian back from the dead, he could clear your uncle’s name. He could explain what happened that day. He could say, hey, I thought my son was dead, that sucked, and my brother just sort of happened to be there.”

“That’s not funny,” Sizhui said.

“It’s not,” Zizhen said. “I wasn’t making light of the situation.”

“We don’t know if that’s what will happen,” Jingyi pointed out, and he had a good point. If Wei Wuxian didn’t say that Jiang Cheng was innocent, then the already infamous severe temper could get even worse. While there wouldn’t be consequences in a legal sense, there would be hell to pay. “You know what else we don’t know?”

“What *now*?”

“We don’t know what excuse we’re going to have when we can’t go on a night hunt a month from now.”

Sizhui looked down at the giant circle of energy. There was a very good chance that it would deplete their stores that much. Even if they *didn’t* get his father, perhaps they’d be so far gone they’d need to be dancing around their instructors so much.

“What if we’re actually out on our own night hunt for that long?” Jin Ling said. He shrugged a bit. “Just the four of us.”

“What, you just want us to be running off on our own?” Jingyi said.

Jin Ling looked down. Sizhui tilted his head – was Jin Ling blushing a bit? He glanced over at Zizhen, but the boy in red was trying to bite back a smile. *Oh*. Jin Ling wanted to have Jingyi at his side for longer. Sizhui smiled. “I think that could be a fine excuse. We are all friends, are we not?”

“No! No it’s not! We can’t *lie* about being on a night hunt for a *month!*” Jingyi said.

Zizhen shrugged, “Maybe it won’t be a whole month! We don’t know.”

Someone coughed, but it wasn’t any of them. *A look at me cough. A I’m here, pay attention, you’re in trouble*, cough, and all the blood drained from Sizhui’s face. There was no way they could explain the mass of talismanic paper taking over the room. They turned from the great circle of runes. The Jin Regent Sect leader stood at the doorway, the regal robes of pink and yellow embellished with perfect Jin gold adorned her and her hair, peony standing tall atop her head. She stared at them, watching.

“So.” She said. “I’m assuming none of this is your classwork.”

“Just... a friendly discussion,” Zizhen said. She did not believe them.

“Of course.” She said politely. “And your night hunt?”

“There were rumors,” Jin Ling said. “The local mountains have some ghosts.”

“Mm.” Qin Su said. “And that would take a month.”

“Travelling ghosts.” Jin Ling said.”

“Of course.” She said. Qin Su bowed. “If you’ll excuse me.”

She backed out of the room, turned her back and left. When they saw the last of her robes, Jingyi groaned.

“She’s going to send for our parents, isn’t she?” Zizhen said. “She’s not even going to write a letter. She’s just going to send a butterfly and we’ll be dead.”

“How long before Sect Leader Ouyang gets here?” Sizhui asked.

“Maybe two days,” Zizhen said. “If we’re lucky, a bit longer if he needs Mother to set care up for my sisters.”

“Uncle will be here in a day and a half.” Jin Ling shook his head.

Jingyi was shaking his head. “You’re forgetting something. Hanguang-Jun is already *pissed*. He’ll probably just fly all night to get here.”

Jingyi was right. With everything going on, his foster father would be here before sunrise. Sizhui pressed his lips together for a moment, taking in a short breath. “If anyone does not wish to do this, now would be the time to say.”

“We’re talking about time travel,” Zizhen said. He smiled. “We are friends.”

“This is dangerous.”

“We’re running out of time,” Jingyi said. “If we do this, we’re not going to get a practice run. Do you guys get that? We’d need to do it now, and we can’t do it here.”

“The mountains,” Jin Ling said, raising his hand to the air. “Look. We get away from here so if Hanguang-Jun gets here, he has to *find* us. We use the energy of the mountain to help stabilize it. And Wei Wuxian jumped off a mountain because everyone hated him, and his son was dead. We put the talisman on the side of the mountain, Sizhui, you reach *through* the talisman so you’re standing up straight and you just... catch him.”

“I was being serious,” Sizhui said. “I heard Jingyi before. The size of this talisman is massive. There’s a good chance we’ll be out for a very long time. There’s a reason my father never did it by himself. If anyone of you don’t wish to do this... I won’t hold it against you.”

Zizhen stepped forward. “Your father never used it because he was *alone*.”

Sizhui looked down.

Jingyi even stepped forward. “We’re cultivators. And it might be scary, but if there’s one thing we can do, it’s handling the scary things. But we are running out of time, so can we get going now? Besides. If there’s one thing to get us in the text books, it has to be this.”

Sizhui smiled. “I guess so.”

“Stop being sentimental,” Jin Ling said. “And get the papers.”

They rushed. The Lans were the ones who checked that each paper was grabbed, but after that, they pounced on their swords, squeezing themselves from the windows to get out.

“Are the guards going to notice we ran out?” Zizhen yelled on the wind.

“Definitely,” Jin Ling said, leading them in flight. “But they get confused now that I’m older as to who they listen to.”

And maybe Qin Su was still sending her butterflies. Maybe they still had a bit of a lead. Why did Sizhui still feel so rushed?

Probably because what they were doing was so incredibly dangerous. There were stories of a man in the Wen war who spent so much spiritual energy fighting he was unconscious for three days – and he had no doubt there were about to spend so much more than that. They followed Jin Ling to a mountain, thankfully leagues from any town or home and farm, away from anywhere that the blasting energy might hurt.

“I wish we could have had a rehearsal,” Zizhen said.

“Well, notes for next time,” Jingyi said. “We shut the door before we gossip.”

Their position on the mountain was rough – incredibly slanted upwards, but with all the rumors, Jin Ling had a good point. Sizhui would be reaching through straight towards a Wei Wuxian and the angle may well be perfect. While standing around the talisman, they had to stand awkwardly, however, with a foot placed far higher than the other to keep balance on the side of the mountain. Already they could feel power draining from them, and not just them. Grass beneath them began dying. Disintegrating. Mud began sloshing at their feet, digging in as the light of the talisman began painting in front of them.

“Have you ever seen a red talisman?” Zizhen yelled over the noise of an oncoming storm.

“Yeah,” Jingyi yelled back. “It’s not usually great!”

Wind swirled around the talisman, but a picture, not of the mountain, but of dark reds and hard rock, solidified inside it, like peering up a cliff. No. Like peering across a cliff. There was an arm outstretched, and he knew that white cloth well. It wasn’t silk, it was too tough for that. It was battle cloth, made to take dirt and strikes. But the shoulder was red, and there was a siege of blood seeping down the arm as it struggled to hold on, refusing to let go.

Let go of the man it clung to, the man who refused to cling back.

“Lan Zhan.” He said. “Let me go.”

“Sizhui!”

Sizhui looked up with a gasp. Jin Ling already looked so haggard. Somehow the teen managed to look like he hadn’t eaten in days. Thunder hit, and it hit his ears like a firework, vibrating hard as the mud climbed up his knees. It was happening so fast, they’d run out of time, and Sizhui had barely been able to move. He hadn’t even been able to recognize that it worked – *where was the mud coming from*, and the panic that it was happening.

“GO!” Jin Ling yelled.

Sizhui tried to push forward, trying to get his legs to work as the dirt and grime and mud made it hard to walk. He had to get to the portal. Had to get his father. How did it work? How was he going to explain? How long did he have? “Dad!”

His had stretched out, touching the magic. “Dad!”

Chapter End Notes

I'm really sorry about the delay. Things have been cooky crazy around here, but I'm getting back in the swing of things! Sorry if this sucks :(

I Could Build Your Heart a Home

Dear Sizhui,

Every day.

Sincerely, Lan Wangji

The mud was thickening at his feet, swirling and sucking his ankles in deeper, and dirty, rapid water was starting to bubble through the dirt and grit. Just lifting a foot up took effort as half his mind went to trying to power the great, deep red talisman, the circle of light before him that showed the cliffside.

Wei Wuxian was stuck, mid-fall, hair pushing up into the air as his body lay frozen. Sizhui turned his chin up. He'd never seen such a look of horror and despair struck on Hanguang-Jun's face. Jiang Cheng was half turned away, and from what Sizhui could see, only had a look of disgust. But neither were moving. Even their hair in the wind was as stony as a Lan.

The water was getting deeper. Sizhui could already feel the exhaustion starting to pull on his heart. That was his father. That was his foster father, his uncle. They looked so young. His father's eyes were shut as he hovered in mid-air, accepting the fate he chose for himself.

No. Sizhui swallowed. He only chose it thinking A-Yuan, Sizhui, had already died. Wei Wuxian wouldn't have done this if he knew. Sizhui pushed through, sticking his feet deep in the mud and water to hold on.

Congratulations, Hanguang-Jun! His father said once in a memory. *When he likes someone, he holds on to their legs, and he does not let go.*

Sizhui wasn't going to let go. Not now. "Dad! Dad!"

Time was frozen around them. It showed in everything. The colors that refused to move. The robes stuck in the wind, Hanguang-Jun's face, baby fat still clinging to his cheeks, but his mouth struck still. Sizhui reached and reached, feeling it stretch in his shoulders as he tried to tear himself closer without falling out of the portal. The mud on the other side was starting to

come loose, like wet sand on a bank of a river, rather than the dry rock of the mountain just twisting with water. Sizhui leaned as far forward as he could without toppling, and his fingertips just began to graze black robes.

The portal twitched, and there. Just there. Wei Wuxian moved as time wrapped around him. He looked to Sizhui, overcome with shock. His eyes widened, pulling on the two freckles by his nose, the twitch of his lip hiding the mark under his lip.

His father looked, and saw him. Lightning shot up Sizhui's spine. No matter how tiring this spell was, he could last, just a bit longer. His left hand stayed alight, churning out as much spiritual energy as he could, forcing the portal to stay open as his free right hand stretched out. "Take my hand!"

Sizhui struggled, trying to reach further, grasping at bits of black cloth, old, dirty, but bold. Wei Wuxian's hand uncurled, loose enough for the dizi to lose touch with his fingers. It didn't fall, though, time still trapped in this perilous place as the two hovered in the air. How quickly the mud loosened under his feet, how tired his chest felt. So long as Wei Wuxian could see him, he could go just a bit more – "Please!"

"You," Wei Wuxian said, his voice clipped short, like the frozen air itself blocked his sound. "How?"

"Please, we don't have time for questions," Sizhui said. Each moment he felt more tired, like his eyes could shut and not open for hours. What were the others feeling? Were they struggling with the mud as well? "You need to grab my hand!"

Wei Wuxian didn't understand. He shook his head, the tiniest movements. If Sizhui wasn't straining so hard, trying to see through the fog starting to cloud his eyes, he wouldn't have noticed.

"A vision," Wei Wuxian said. "Not real. I failed them, I can't–"

"No!" Sizhui yelled. "No! You didn't fail them! You didn't fail anyone!"

“They’re all dead!”

“No!” He couldn’t explain. He didn’t have the time. Sizhui’s legs felt so waterlogged, his body all the way up to the part that crawled through the portal. The world weighed him down. The fog in his mind was ensnaring him. *He could explain, but how?* He wanted to pinch his nose and lay down, but he knew it would only get worse from here.

Why was his body so *cold*?

“No. They’re not all dead.” He felt like he was begging. “I can take you to A-Yuan. I can take you to A-Yuan, you just have to take my hand.”

Was his father crying? It was so hard to see, but Sizhui could tell it was heartbreak on his face. Almost as broken as the face the frozen Lan Wangji, just above wore. “He’s gone. He was just a baby, they killed him-“

“They didn’t,” Sizhui promised. “Look at me. I’m a Lan! Lans don’t lie, it’s against the rules. A-Yuan is alive, and I can take you to him. Just take my hand.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes began to travel, noting the clothes, the ribbon, the silver clip marking him as close to the main family. *Lans don’t lie, please, please believe me.* “Just take my hand.”

“A vision,” Wei Wuxian whispered again.

“Even if I’m a vision,” Sizhui said. “Is A-Yuan worth it?”

The mind was working now. Sizhui felt as frozen as the men on the top of the cliff, heart as frozen as the rest of his skin, waterlogged and drowning. But Wei Wuxian raised his hand and finally –

The weight was heavy. Suddenly, Wei Wuxian dropped from his place frozen in the air and Sizhui bolted, struggling to hold on. Wei Wuxian looked down, his feet dangling mid air as all the world's gravity struck him down and Sizhui pulled, trying to keep a grip.

Wei Ying! Someone yelled. Sizhui glanced away from his father's face – Wei Wuxian's shadow was traveling down as if he was still falling. Time was keeping itself straight. He started to pull, gripping on Wei Wuxian's arms as tight as he could. "I get the feeling we should hold our breath."

Wei Wuxian stared at him with wide, wet eyes. "For A-Yuan."

"For A-Yuan." Sizhui agreed.

The other side of the portal was pure water. He immediately uncurled his hand, letting the rest of his fingers rest to stop the power he was fueling to the talisman. He tugged Wei Wuxian through, and suddenly the man sagged, dead weight in his arms. Sizhui tried to jostle his shoulder, just once, but it did nothing. He was simply collapsed.

Sizhui was running out of air. He kicked hard, but the mud grabbed his shoes. *You don't swim with shoes*, Zhou Yun had once said, at the very start of his lessons. He kicked his feet free, wrapping an arm around Wei Wuxian's chest to try and hold him together.

You must stretch your arms long, young master! Zhou Yun had said. He stretched his free hand up. Why was there so much water? They were on a mountain. Was he so tired, he forgot where they were? How much further until he breached the surface? His chest burned. He struggled, kicking his feet as hard as he could, desperate to keep Wei Wuxian in his arms.

You have to imagine your arms are splitting the waves, the smoother the motion, the better, Jin Ling had said. He turned his hand to the side, splitting the water down before turning his hand flat to push himself up. Was he even going in the right direction?

The reflection of the sun seemed to point in the right direction. He didn't have the chance to think. He used his free arm, trying, hoping, he was still going away from the mud that clogged his shoes to the bottom, kicking his legs as best as he could.

When his face cleared the surface of the water, he didn't have the energy to be relieved. Thunder clapped hard, the sky nearly black with clouds. "I got him! I got him! Stop the spell!"

Zizhen and Jin Ling were swimming hard, arms over their heads. When they saw him, they dropped, immediately pushing through the water. Jin Ling spun in the water. "Jingyi! Where's Jingyi?"

Sizhui coughed, wrapping both arms around Wei Wuxian. Why wasn't he waking up? Where was Jingyi? "Jingyi! Jingyi!"

Zizhen backpedaled, turning. It was too dark to see. He coughed over the water, his legs were burning with the effort. He wanted to stop. What harm was a moment's rest? The world was so cloudy. His core felt so empty. The water... so cold. Pulling him down. Zizhen yelled. "There!"

Jin Ling pounced, arms stretching overhead to cut through the water. Zizhen began swimming forward. "Sizhui, get to the shore!"

Shore, what *shore*? Sizhui turned in the water, struggling with his father's weight. There were specks of green. *Not much further, not much further. You can rest on land, it's not much further.* He coughed up water, tasting dirt and iron as he did. Zizhen was swimming, looking just as tired as Sizhui felt.

Use the smallest width of your body, Jin Ling had said. *You realize swimming is supposed to be fun?*

Nothing about this was fun. He was so sure they had been on a mountain. How was shore so far away? It took ages before his feet began to slip along mud and slicked dead grass. Was it just him, or was the water level still climbing? He stood, turning to walk backwards as he tugged Wei Wuxian's body up the mud until finally, finally they were far enough along the shore that he could collapse alongside him. On his knees, Sizhui pressed his ear to Wei Wuxian's chest.

A heartbeat. He raised a hand to rest under his nose. Air. Wei Wuxian was still breathing. Sizhen coughed, on his hands and knees as he trekked through the mud before falling all the way down, stomach in the mud as rain poured down. Sizhui sat down on his ankles, fog still rolling into his eyes. He fell back, laying in the grass as he stared at the overcast sky. Water was climbing up to his ankles. He didn't have the energy to do anything about it. Jin Ling pushed out of the water, the gold of his clothing watered down to an eerie, near white as he tugged Jingyi out of the waves.

Sizhui wanted to lift his head, but he couldn't. He could just see the bare shadow of Jin Ling pulling Jingyi out, laying him along the straw-like, dead grass. Water was at Sizhui's calves now. Why was it climbing so much? Jin Ling grunted, a fisted hand shoving down. Sizhui peered through lashes, trying to see the shadowing figure. Jin Ling hit again. He was hitting Jingyi's chest – why?

Sizhui heard the third hit and suddenly Jingyi was coughing, a wet, spluttering sound like tea sloshing out of a pot before the ragged gasps of air could make it out of his mouth. If Sizhui wasn't mistaken, he could have sworn he saw Jin Ling grab his shoulders and kiss Jingyi hard.

"Thank you, thank you, you're alive," Jin Ling whispered. Water. There was so much water. It was up to Sizhui's thighs now, frozen and chilled like an underwater spring, like the cold pond icing him to his bones.

Jin Ling rolled over, collapsing in the dead grass and mud. Sizhui couldn't see him anymore, not as he lay collapsed as well. Thunder rolled, but he couldn't even flinch anymore as rain poured around them, swirling the water higher, higher. To his hips now.

Wei Wuxian's eyes stayed closed, head lolled slightly to the side. It didn't matter, not yet. Sizhui could see that soft rise and fall in his chest. He was still breathing. *We did it*. He could hear the soft mumblings, Sizhen coughing into the mud, struggling to breathe. Sizhui tensed an arm, in his mind rolling over to grab Sizhen's shoulder, help him roll on his back. But his arm was too sore, too tired.

Sizhui had to believe they'd be okay. Water pooled to his stomach, but Wei Wuxian was still there. They all were. Sizhui curled a hand into the dead grass and rising water, fingers

straying against black, black robes. Even if just for a moment, they were family. His eyes finally shut, water up to his chest.

They were whole.

and if I did, would you come home?

Chapter Summary

Would you meet me in the middle? Could we both stop keeping score? There's a battle I must fight alone, it's you I'm fighting for. If I call off the battalion, break my walls down stone by stone, tear down my defenses, I could build your heart a home.

And if I did, would you come home?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sleep wasn't restorative.

Sizhui felt waves rolling over him. One dizzy, the next exhausted, one dizzy, the next exhausted. It was like he was rocking from side to side, up and down on a raft not made for water. Just a *board*, broken away from wherever it belonged as it desperately tried to stay afloat. Something touched his forehead, warm and soft, barely wet. There was something making noise, no, something, someone humming. Sizhui knew this song. Hanguang-Jun sang it, hummed it. Hanguang-Jun couldn't tell stories, but he knew this much. Sizhui rocked on the waves, threatening to drag him down, but he was warm.

He wasn't sure when he went from freezing cold to warm enough to stop shivering. At some point, it happened, and it didn't really matter when to him. He was starting to float higher than before, nose breaching the surface of something awake. He felt an itch in his throat, a shaking in his chest. Like coughing, if he were able to hear it. The warm, wet wiping across his forehead returned and his chest began to settle, resting along the waves.

Dear Wei Wuxian,

Hello. My name is Lan Sizhui.

I have missed you.

It took ages for his eyes to open. The dark wood blurred over him, easing his way to finally turn and see light for the first time in, according to the burn in his pupils, a long while. He winced, face starting to turn to the side. Trees outside the circular paper framed window, green with speckles of orange and red. When did it become fall?

“Oh, holy crap, you’re finally awake.” A voice said. Sizhui turned his head more. There was a row of three beds, each with neatly tucked and dyed in blue with white detailing. The Lan medical beds, his mind supplied, and his eyes turned up. Jin Ling sat up in his bed, arms crossed over his chest. “Even *Jingyi* woke up before you did, and he’s the one who *drowned*.”

“I didn’t drown,” Jingyi was laying on his side in the middle bed. “I merely went to sleep before either of you.”

“Leave off, Jin Ling,” Zizhen was in the farthest bed, closest to the door. “I’m sure going through that talisman took far more spiritual energy than any of us. That’s all. Even the healers said so.”

The door slid open, probably due to the noise they were making. Sizhui smiled in relief. The last he had seen, he wasn’t sure if Jingyi would have made it. He remembered the whispers that Jin Ling said, and the way their shadows moved. He remembered Zizhen in the mud, face down like he might have inhaled it. Maybe going through time wasn’t the smartest idea they could have had. Jiang Cheng stepped in, alight in purple. His ring sparked, eyes scanning each one of them until they all silenced, swallowing horror, until the sect leader’s eyes finally settled on Sizhui. He pushed his shoulders down. “You’re awake.”

“I suppose I am,” Sizhui reached up, grabbing a bed post. He could pull himself up, he could sit up. He could totally do that; he just needed a little – he grunted in effort – leverage. “What happened?”

Someone grabbed his elbows and began pulling. Sizhui gasped, but Hanguang-Jun paid him no mind, and just helped him settle in an upright position. Sizhui blinked in surprise, but Hanguang-Jun just looked down at him, no malice in his face, no anger, just relief.

“We should be asking you that,” Jiang Cheng stated. He walked, footsteps firm and pressed into the flooring before he stopped at the end of Sizhui’s bed. “Your friends haven’t been much help.”

“We were just waiting for Sizhui to wake up!” Jingyi protested. Jiang Cheng shot a glare Jingyi’s way, and Sizhui didn’t need to look. He could *feel* Jingyi shrinking back into the bedframe and pillows.

“Did it work?” Sizhui asked. Jiang Cheng nodded his head to the side, as if to say, *look*. Sizhui turned. Lan Wangji had set up his stool next to Sizhui’s bed, facing him from the foot of it. On the other side, was another bed Sizhui hadn’t noticed.

Wei Wuxian lay sleeping, hands folded on his stomach like someone had tucked him into bed with care. Sizhui forced himself up, slamming his feet to the ground.

“*Dad!*” He said but as soon as he put his weight on his feet, dizziness took back over. Lan Wangji grabbed him fast, easing his back down on to the bed. Sizhui put his hand to his forehead, groaning.

“Easy, easy,” Jiang Cheng warned. “Do you idiots even *realize* how much energy you spent? You’ve been asleep for three weeks!”

“Two and a half!” Jin Ling protested. Sizhui sat back down, glancing over at Jin Ling. Lan Wangji pulled the blanket back over him, tucking it back around his waist like he was a child all over again. “I woke up first.”

“And what a claim to pride that is,” Jiang Cheng said. “Now. *What did you do?*”

“We were on a mountain,” Sizhui said.

“Yes, you were on a mountain. And you **inverted it**,” Jiang Cheng said. “Lanling has now lost one of its prized peaks and instead is home to a brand new, empty lake that they cannot even fish in. Honestly, if one of the previous sect leaders were around, we’d be accused of stealing land. That spell you cast killed all the grass and spent up all the healthy dirt underneath to help power it, as well as completely depleting your spiritual energy stores.

You're lucky you were left with the ability to create more, otherwise that spell could well have burnt you out. You don't want to know what that's like. What were you thinking?"

"Apparently," Jingyi muttered. "We were thinking attempt the impossible. And we did a good job."

"You!" Jiang Cheng said. His breath caught in his chest, and he looked down. "You did. Like Wei Wuxian... you seem to understand it better than me."

Jiang Cheng sat on Jin Ling's bed, a hand on his nephew's calf. "You understand you could have died. That spell, did you even know how it worked? Did you test it at all? It could have burned all of you up right with it. Not just your core, but *you*."

"We weren't thinking like that," Zizhen admitted. "We are sorry about that, Sect Leader. But... we just thought we could save him."

"If you did not test the talisman," Hanguang-Jun asked. "How did you know what it would do?"

"Because I'm just like him," Sizhui said. "Everything we found of his talismans showed me that we're alike. He wanted to be able to see his parents just like I did. He wanted to meet them, just like me. But he was smart enough to be able to really try and do it. And what else would a talisman that size do?"

Hanguang-Jun didn't say anything, but for the first time since Sizhui woke up, turned to look at the man in the bed next to him. Sizhui looked as well – from this point of view, he just looked like he was sleeping. Far too skinny from years of starving himself to feed his son, far, far too skinny. The heavy bags under his eyes were gone, however, seeing as he was already asleep, and for the first time ever, his clothes were clean, new, and a quality that Sizhui had never seen him touch.

That much made him smile. They were Lan Wangji's under shirts, he knew well the high price of that cloth. Wei Wuxian deserved it. "Is he... okay?"

“Mm.” Lan Wangji said.

“For the most part,” Jiang Cheng said. Sizhui felt the exhaustion creep back in. The others were laying back down, as well, their own energy stores breaking down. “Go back to sleep. He’ll still be here when you wake up.”

“Has he woken up?” Sizhui asked. He scooted back down in bed, turning on his side so he could face Wei Wuxian.

“Not yet,” Lan Wangji said. “There is no reason for him not to.”

“Good.” Sizhui smiled as he went to sleep. “Good.”

The next time he awoke, Sizhui was able to stay awake longer. He opened his eyes, and a small smile grew. Jin Ling had managed to pull himself away from his pillows and sat on the foot of his bed instead, the first to move from his place under the blankets. He even had his feet settled under his knees, laughing a bit. Zizhen and Jingyi were both sat up, backs against the pillows, but they seemed bright enough.

“You’re doing better,” Sizhui said. Jingyi grinned his way.

“They’re calling us the Masters of Time,” Jingyi said.

“Who?”

“The younger disciples,” Zizhen said. “I even heard one of the healers say it.”

Sizhui heard a small snort of air. He turned back to his left, and Lan Wangji was still there, sat perfectly in the middle between Sizhui and Wei Wuxian. Sizhui raised his brows, and Lan

Wangji tilted his head. “Do not gossip.”

Sizhui ducked his head down, and he heard Jingyi mutter. Being scolded was never a good goal, but... Sizhui was sure this was something to be excited about. He didn't think they'd be given titles, especially so young. Especially something like this.

“It's not *quite* gossip, is it?” Zizhen asked. “It's true. And it's wonderful, the four of us being named together.”

Lan Wangji exhaled again; eyes ever so slightly narrowed.

“Has he woken up?” Sizhui asked.

Lan Wangji nodded. “Briefly. His fever is high, but we are treating him for it.”

“Good.” Sizhui said. Lan Wangji stood, and sat on his bed, near his waist to be closer.

“I wish you had not risked your life,” Lan Wangji said. “But I will thank you for bringing him home.”

Sizhui smiled and shook his head. “I don't need your thanks.”

Lan Wangji shut his eyes, turning his face slightly down.

“What is it?”

“You are his son,” Lan Wangji said. “He used to say something similar.”

Sizhui remembered being so young, maybe six or seven, and standing on his toes to ask something of Lan Wangji. He dared call him father, and Hanguang-Jun said it for the first time: *You already had a father. I won't take that title from him.* How confusing it had been, all those years. Sizhui spared a glance towards the unconscious man not three feet away, and then reached forward. He put his hand on Lan Wangji's and smiled. "I'm yours, too."

"Lan Sizhui," Hanguang-Jun warned.

"I've already had two fathers," Sizhui said. "What's one more? I choose you as family, too."

Wei Wuxian's head twitched. It was almost imperceptible if it weren't for the fact that two Lans were right next to him, and half their minds were zeroed in focused on him. His head twitched just barely, to the side, his eyes tighter than before. "What's wrong with him? Is he in pain?"

Lan Wangji shook his head and moved to Wei Wuxian's bed. Zizhen piped up, "What's going on? Is everything okay?"

"A nightmare," Lan Wangji said. He sat by Wei Wuxian's chest and put his head on the sleeping man's shoulders. "Wei Ying. Wake up."

Wei Wuxian twitched again. Lan Wangji gently shook his shoulders, and Wei Wuxian's eyes sprang open. *Awake, he was awake* – he pressed a forearm into the bed, pushing himself up right with great force. "Falling! I was falling, I was – and everyone – it hurt so-"

"You were dreaming, Wei Ying," Lan Wangji promised. So, Wei Wuxian was about *half* asleep, but Sizhui was overwhelmed. That was his father, awake, breathing, and so, so real. Even as the white bed shirt clung to a fevered body, it just showed how much the man was *breathing*, how his chest rose and fell again. Cloudy brown eyes looked up, staring wetly at –

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian said. "A-Yuan. He's sick. He's so sick. He's sick and I can't help him, keeps coughing, he can't breathe. My A-Yuan is sick-"

“No, I’m-” Sizhui put his feet on the ground, ready to move. *I’m right here, I promise.* He had, he had promised to bring Wei Wuxian to A-Yuan, and he would. He could keep that promise, in a slightly wrong form, but he could try. Lan Wangji gave him a short look and shook his head. Sizhui frowned and settled his feet on the floor.

Lan Wangji pressed a hand to Wei Wuxian’s shoulder, making him pause in his babbles.
“And I am rich.”

“Lan Zhan?” Wei Wuxian asked. Sizhui could barely see the soft flex in his foster father’s arm as he pushed lightly on Wei Wuxian’s shoulder, and Wei Wuxian fell slightly back, weight leaning on his forearms.

“I will get every doctor in all of Caiyi and surrounding cities,” Lan Zhan promised. “I will get every medicine for A-Yuan.”

“You’ll... you’ll get,” Wei Wuxian said. His hands fell forward along the bedding until he collapsed back against the pillow.

“Mm. Every doctor and every medicine,” Lan Wangji promised. “A-Yuan will want for nothing. I will ensure of it.”

“Oh, Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian sighed. “I owe you too much. Thank you.”

“There’s no need for thanks,” Lan Wangji said. “Good night, Wei Ying.”

Wei Wuxian breathed deep and Sizhui watched as his eyes shut. Like that he was back asleep. Lan Wangji reached forward and carefully, so gently like he was afraid Wei Wuxian might break, folded his hands over his chest, staring at his face.

“I can’t believe he uses Hanguang-Jun’s *birth name*,” Jingyi muttered.

“Jingyi!” Zizhen said. Sizhui turned just in time to see Zizhen lob a pillow right at Jingyi’s face.

“*What was that for?*” Jingyi protested.

“For being *stupid!*” Zizhen yelled. “We’re the Masters of Time together but all of you are so stupid.”

“Do not be unkind,” Lan Wangji warned.

“I’m sorry Hanguang-Jun!” Zizhen said. But his glare towards Jingyi showed no regret. The door opened once more, and with great familiarity, Jiang Cheng came in. He dramatically pushed a large sleeve backwards, glancing over the beds.

“You’re all awake. Good, good,” he said. He only glanced once towards Hanguang-Jun, with a glare that Sizhui had seen many times before, but it was surprising to see it again now. “Nephews. How are you feeling?”

“More awake, Uncle,” Jin Ling promised.

“Not unsurprising,” Jiang Cheng said. “You should be well enough to leave the Healing Chambers soon enough.”

“Uncle,” Sizhui said. “What is going on out there?”

“We are lucky Regent Sect Leader Qin Su is not mad at the loss of a mountain,” Jiang Cheng said. “We are at least trying to see if there’s a way to stock the new lake with fish, so that it isn’t an entire loss on their part.”

“That would be nice, Uncle,” Jin Ling said.

“If you weren’t my nephew, you would be in a lot of trouble,” Jiang Cheng said. “Sect Leader Ouyang is trying to convince everyone that none of you are Jiang and therefore he should have more control than I and more of the reward of your lot’s growing infamy for messing with *time*. It is not going well for him.”

“I will see if I can talk to him, once we’re out of here,” Zizhen promised.

“Talk to your father? Hah,” Jiang Cheng said. Perhaps Zizhen could, though, in Sizhui’s opinion – after all, Sect Leader Ouyang didn’t have any great strides like Zizhen now did. Jiang Cheng moved to Wei Wuxian’s bed and glared down at Hanguang-Jun. “Move.”

Hanguang-Jun glared back.

“Move. I’m bringing him to the bath house.” Jiang Cheng said. Hanguang-Jun seemed to glare harder, a fist clenching at his side. “Do you think I’m stupid? I told you before and I’ll tell you again, the likes of *you* aren’t allowed to bath him. I’m his brother, this is *my* job.”

“Father,” Sizhui tried, but the cold hard stare was turned on him instead. “Dad does likely need a bath, to get the fever sweat off of him.”

“How is he doing?” Jingyi asked.

“He is alive.” Jiang Cheng said. “And for the most part, well.”

“For the most part, what does that mean?” Jingyi asked. “Do you mean the fever?”

“Fevers can be fixed.”

“Uncle, what are you saying?” Sizhui asked.

Jiang Cheng looked over his shoulder to Sizhui, and for a moment, paused. Perhaps they were tired of secrets, now, and finally he spoke. “It seems removing someone from time has side effects. His golden core did not come through the talisman.”

Sizhui heard shuffling – Zizhen and Jingyi forcing themselves to sit fully upright. “I don’t understand.”

Hanguang-Jun’s glare could set something on fire. “It’s. No. Matter.”

“Of course, it’s a matter. You’ve never lost a core, I have. It’s painful, it can *destroy* you. What are we going to tell him when he wakes up?”

“That I can fix it.”

“Yes, yes, yes!” Zizhen yelled, his voice rushed and hard as if to cut Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji off from daring to say more. “Absolutely, of course, we do not need to hear any more. We’re so sorry this happened! But thank you, we’re good now.”

Jiang Cheng huffed and pushed Lan Wangji’s hand off of Wei Wuxian. “Get off of him. *Disgusting.*”

He bent over and gently picked Wei Wuxian up into his arms. He looked small, the gauntness of his chest showing too much after the years of starving to keep Sizhui fed. A proud cultivator with more than sixteen years of strength and practice in him, Jiang Cheng had no problem carrying him out with a determined stare forward, ignoring those around him as he went to go bathe him.

“Father.” Sizhui said. “I’m really okay. Perhaps you could go rest while Jiang Cheng is taking care of dad.”

Hanguang-Jun's eyes were moving: first to the door Jiang Cheng had left through, then to Sizhui, then back again, starting all over. "I promise. We'll look after each other."

Lan Wangji stood and looked to his son. "I'm proud of you, too."

Sizhui smiled. "Thank you."

It didn't take more than a few moments of quiet before Lan Wangji left, robes bustling behind him.

"He's not going to rest." Zizhen said. Jingyi threw the pillow that had been tossed his way right at Zizhen's head, but Zizhen reached up and caught it midair. He stuck his tongue at Jingyi snarkily.

"Zizhen, what the *hell*." Jingyi protested.

"What was that?" Jin Ling said.

"All of you are stupid and I hate you." Zizhen said. Sizhui turned around, facing his three friends fully. "Absolute idiots."

"You've been saying that for days, now, but you never explain yourself." Jingyi protested.

"That's because I don't want to. I never want to say it out loud, I want you to be smart enough to figure it out for yourself."

"Perhaps it's just a different kind of intelligence," Sizhui said.

“Perhaps you just shouldn’t be stuck up about it,” Jin Ling huffed, crossing his arms.

“Or just say it, I don’t see how bad it can be for you to not want to say it,” Jingyi said.

“We’re stuck watching you-” Jin Ling started.

“Whatever it’s about, it’s clearly about my fathers-”

“And my uncle-”

“If I have to keep watching this,” Jingyi said.

“Oh, holy crap!” Zizhen bemoaned. “Your dad wants to fuck your dad!”

It was suddenly very, very quiet. Jin Ling, Jingyi, and Sizhui stared. Zizhen dropped his face to his hands and shook his head side to side for a long quiet moment. Sizhui blinked, and looked to Jin Ling, but Jin Link could only shake his head. The shock and confusion were so, so heavy.

“Uh.” Jingyi finally whispered. “Zizhen?”

Zizhen groaned.

“That’s not exactly *funny*.”

“I’m not joking! I don’t understand how all of you could be so *blind*.” Zizhen whined. Sizhui frowned, a grimace starting to curl his cheek up. “I noticed it so long ago. Hanguang-Jun is in love with Wei Wuxian!”

“Zizhen,” Sizhui said.

“I don’t know if Wei Wuxian has noticed, or if perhaps he was simply too busy with his group and his duties to Baby Sizhui to do anything about his own feelings, but it’s undeniable that Hanguang-Jun has been in love with him all this time. And it would be so cute and so lovely and such a deep romance that I would *adore*, if it weren’t for the fact that it’s my friend’s *dads* who were dancing around each other and I’m the only one who realized!”

“Um, Zizhen,” Jin Ling shifted on his bed. “Why do you think-”

“*It’s obvious!*” Zizhen hissed.

“What does that have to do with... what you said, just now?”

“It’s dual cultivation,” Zizhen groaned, dropping his head back and hanging from his shoulders. He whined and lifted it back up to speak to them. “It’s written about in all the fancy and hidden texts and beautiful love poetry that none of you ever bother to read, but the first noted person to do it was Lan An! Meaning if anyone knows how to do it, it’s Hanguang-Jun.”

“And... dual cultivation?”

“It’s cultivating while you have sex. It’s said to help grow a golden core beyond its previous thought limits. If anything can regrow a golden core that has gone, it’s dual cultivation, and Hanguang-Jun is powerful enough to make it happen.” Zizhen said.

“You think...” Sizhui could feel how pale he was. “You think my parents are going to have sex with each other?”

“If Hanguang-Jun wasn’t brave enough to ask before, he certainly has it within him now.” Zizhen.

“So,” Sizhui said. “They’ll have a relationship.”

Zizhen paused. “I mean. Maybe.”

“Wei Wuxian would have to stay in the Jingshi, with father.”

“At least some nights, yes.”

Sizhui grinned. “He’d never go hungry again.”

Jingyi bit his lip, but it wasn’t enough. Laughter peeled out of him until he had to sink into the bed in exhaustion from it. Jin Ling soon followed and Sizhui too, holding their bellies in relief. Finally, something, after all the months of stress, made them laugh.

“Right, of course, it’s so funny.” Zizhen said. “I seriously hate all of you for making me say it.”

Sizhui laughed himself to sleep.

It took another week before they could stand up for the whole day, but finally, they were allowed to depart the Healing Chambers. Sizhui returned to his room that off-shooted the Jingshi, and his eyes couldn’t help but land on his father’s bed.

It was unslept in and had been for some time. He’d stayed in the Healing Chambers every night that Sizhui was there and had not yet left as they waited for Wei Wuxian’s fever to break. Sizhui smiled, encouraging him to do so.

He wasn't the only one who missed Wei Wuxian.

Jiang Cheng stayed as well, yelling at every doctor as they waited for him to wake up, dutifully bathing his brother and helping change the bedding as he snarled at anyone who tried to do it for him. It's how his affection worked, Sizhui realized. Passionate and stubborn as a stone, and perhaps just as protective.

"I fear anyone who may have injured you when you were a child," Sizhui told Jin Ling. His cousin grinned.

"Oh, absolutely." Jin Ling said. "Once a Jin Cousin decided to bring a real sword to training and made fun of me for being scared when I was eight. He stabbed me and was quick to discover that Uncle is more like the rapids in the water rather than the lotuses themselves. He has a limp now."

Zizhen whistled.

The disciples stared at the four of them as they walked through Cloud Recesses. They still had much strength to work to rebuild, and it seemed their spiritual stores would take ages to rebuild, but none around them seemed to care. The smallest disciples pointed in awe, bouncing on their toes in excitement to see them. The teachers even were quiet as they walked past. It was only supposed to be *walks*, gently building up the strength in their back and legs as they started small.

It seemed they wouldn't be seen as small, as children, again for a while. At least not by anyone who wasn't family. Sizhui always felt his cheeks just start to warm, but it wasn't nearly as bad as poor Jingyi, who started walking with his face down when he saw people coming.

"Come on," Jin Ling would say. He grabbed Jingyi's forearm, and would start to walk faster, getting them away from people as fast as possible. Zizhen would have to stuff his sleeves into his mouth, probably to keep from cooing.

It was rather cute.

It was two more weeks before the doors of the Healing Chambers burst open. Sizhui and the others turned in shock as Wei Wuxian tumbled out, shoulders hitting the grass and dirt hard. Bare feet scrambled – he wasn't yet dressed, still only in Lan Wangji's white under shirt and black trousers. Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji came down the steps, each with a hand up, desperate to calm Wei Wuxian down.

"It's okay," Jiang Cheng said. "You're okay!"

"I told you I wouldn't go to Cloud Recesses," Wei Wuxian yelled. "How'd I get here... How'd I *get here*? The Wens-"

"You are okay," Jiang Cheng insisted. "You're not here to be punished. Everyone is on your side."

Wei Wuxian was muttering, hands going to his temple. Lan Wangji stepped forward and quickly put his hand to Wei Wuxian's forearm. Wei Wuxian stiffened, even Sizhui could tell all the way across the courtyard and looked up at him. "No. No! I told you, I can't go to Cloud Recesses, what have you *done*?"

"Wei Ying. It has been sixteen years."

"What?"

"The world is on your side now," Jiang Cheng pressed. He had a spare under robe in his hand, his shoulders itching to help his brother even now.

"That's impossible." Wei Wuxian said. "Even if it wasn't that's too late, when everyone is dead. They're all dead. It's all my fault, and they're all dead, they're all-"

"A-Yuan is not dead." Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian stopped. “What?”

Sizhui started stepping forward, his feet careful along the stone path. Lan Wangji pointed his way, and Sizhui paused, wishing he could smile.

“Now, see, if you become a Lan you have to follow all sorts of rules!” His father tried to explain. He reached out, cupping A-Yuan’s cheek in his hand, rubbing a thumb in circles over his face. “You’ll never laugh so hard your shoulders shake. You won’t grin so wide you feel like your face will split in two. You’ll never hug someone so tight, you’ll fear your muscles might tear.”

“This is A-Yuan,” Lan Wangji said.

“I found him hiding in your cave after you ...” Jiang Cheng paused. “I thought... I thought maybe I’d find you. Find something of you. And I did.”

Wei Wuxian stared at him, arm still in Lan Wangji’s hold, but he didn’t seem to notice. Sizhui did. Everything about his face. The freckles by his nose, under his lip, they were all there. The kindness masked in shock in his eyes. The thinness in his face.

“You...” Wei Wuxian whispered. “I dreamed of you as I was falling.”

“Not a dream,” Sizhui said. “I had to save you.”

“You’ll never shake your fists with anger. You’ll never sob in depression. Or run with joy.”

“How?” Wei Wuxian asked. Sizhui wasn’t sure what he was asking. How was Sizhui alive? How was Wei Wuxian? In the end, the answer was all the same.

“Because of my family,” Sizhui said. “It’s been a long while since you’ve had anything good to eat. Don’t you know your own rules? Little turnips should eat their vegetables.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened, and a hand reached up finally. “A-Yuan?”

Sizhui took a breath, and he grinned, wide enough his face felt it might split in two. His hands reached down, gripping some of his robes to lift up, and he ran, crossing the courtyard as fast as he possibly could, faster than he’d ever gone. There was laughter bubbling in his chest, warm and rough but free. He jumped up, an arm wrapping as tight as he could around Wei Wuxian’s shoulders. Hugging him so much felt like his shoulders would tear.

“Dad,” he said, and the laughter in his chest bubbled over, cheeks starting to wet. “Dad, I missed you.”

“I’m here,” Wei Wuxian whispered. His arms wrapped back around Sizhui, holding the wings of his back. Sizhui felt it too, water droplets hitting the cloth by his neck. “I’m here, sweet boy, I’m here.”

Jiang Cheng leaned down, putting the neatly folded robes on the ground, before he turned to the other boys. “Come on. We’re not needed here.”

“But I want to see,” Zizhen said.

“Another reason why we’re going.” Jiang Cheng insisted.

Sizhui pulled back, just slightly so he could look at his father’s face. There, right there, in real life and not in magic, Wei Wuxian had tears on his cheeks as he looked at him. “You’re all grown up. How did this happen?”

“Father raised me,” Sizhui said, and looked from his dad to his father. Lan Wangji nodded his head.

“Lan Zhan?” Wei Wuxian asked. “You? How?”

“A-Yuan is just like you. Every moment raising him was a joy and a blessing.” Lan Wangji said. Sizhui smiled and reached one hand to him. Lan Wangji complied and Sizhui quickly pulled him in, hugging the two of them again so tightly.

It was home.

Father took them all back to the Jinghsì, his hand never left dad’s forearm. Sizhui couldn’t stop grinning, no matter the look from the other Lan teachers who passed them on their walk home. Dad’s attention was split between the two of them in the most perfect way. His questions didn’t stop, each moment he had something new he realized that spanned sixteen long years.

“What was it like being raised here?”

“Warm,” Sizhui said. “Father took care of everything.”

“I always imagined a Lan childhood so cold.” Dad said.

“Mm. Not for Wei Ying,” Father said. “Not for Sizhui.”

“And the world really knows I didn’t-?”

“Everyone knows,” Father said.

“A-Yuan – *Sizhui* – looks so healthy? How did you get so big?”

“Father also encouraged eating my vegetables.” Sizhui said. “You can call me A-Yuan.”

Dad looked at him and smiled, something watery but so true. They stepped up into the doorway of the Jingshi and Dad faltered, stepping backwards for a moment, looking at the sign over head. “Lan Zhan, I don’t know if I should.”

“Wei Ying,” Father held out his hand to him. Dad paused, frowning in pure nerves, but Father didn’t move. He was stoic as ever, and simply waited... waited. Finally, Dad put his hand forward and took it, stepping over the doorway into the Jingshi. “Your core.”

“My... core?” Dad said, fear alight in his eyes. He pressed a hand to his stomach, wincing. “My core.”

“It didn’t come through the talisman.” Sizhui said. “We’re... we’re so sorry. Maybe we didn’t do the spell right or, we don’t really know, but the doctor said it was gone. Like a clean break, just gone. I’m so sorry if this is our fault.”

“My core is gone because... of the talisman,” Dad laughed nervously. “I... I’m sure it’s not your fault. It’s just the time displacement. Of course... the time displacement.”

He put a hand on Sizhui’s shoulder. “It is not your fault; I promise you that. How did you even do this?”

“We found your notes in Lotus Pier.” Sizhui explained.

“Such a smart boy.” His dad said. He leaned forward, and kissed Sizhui on the forehead. Sizhui bubbled in pride, smiling once again. “Never do that again.”

"The talisman notes were lost to the lake, *thankfully*," Father said. "The only ones who will know how to do it are these four."

“I promise never again. Lanling only has so many mountains to lose.”

Dad barked out a laugh, bringing life and cheer into the Jingshi. He only stopped when he turned, spying Father’s stoic stare. “Ah. Lan Zhan. I’ll be okay.”

“Wei Ying.”

“I promise.” Dad said. “It’s all a little strange and overwhelming, but I’m not like Jiang Cheng. I’ll be okay without my core.”

Father reached down, taking both of Dad’s hands in his. Dad gasped, swallowing something nervous in his throat. “Lan Zhan...”

“You don’t have to be for long.”

Finally, for the first time it seemed, in the privacy of the Jingshi, Dad looked into Father’s eyes. In this private moment, just the three of them, Father leaned down, his forehead dropping to Dad’s, breathing each other in. There, in the Jingshi, just the three of them, Father shut his eyes like everything was perfect, and Dad seemed to finally realize. Dad whispered a quiet, “oh.”

Sizhui smiled, watching the two of them together. Everyone was finally home.

Chapter End Notes

this fic was inspired by: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FDUGLGfpWM>
Oh my god, did I do it? I finished it! I want to say thank you all so much for coming along with me on this ride. It means a lot that you all stuck by my monstrosity, and I cherish each one of you who did.

For those who want to know: Jin Ling and Jingyi dance around each other for quite a while, but eventually they fall into a courtship. The Junior Quartet are famed for their time travel shenanigans. Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian become close as brothers once again.

And Lan Wangji gets his way, as his stubbornness demands, and marries Wei Wuxian in order to start dual cultivating as he wants. Wei Wuxian refuses to do so outside of a wedding in red.

Now the question is if I should tag the book as well.

Thank you all so much for reading and commenting! It means the world to me.

End Notes

I hope you enjoy this! Please leave a comment if you have the time.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!